He stings like he means it (He's mean and he's mine)
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Additional Tags:
Canon-Typical Behavior, Canon-Typical Violence, Murder, Religious Imagery & Symbolism, Homophobia, Internalized Homophobia, Implied/Referenced Necrophilia, Jealousy, Emotional Manipulation, Manipulative Relationship, Toxic Relationships, Running Away, Fix-It of Sorts, Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence, Everybody Lives, Nobody is Dead, Except for the people they killed oops, Nigel lives, And that's what matters at the end of the day, The Author Regrets Nothing, Miscommunication, Lack of Communication, Implied/Referenced Character Death, Implied/Referenced Incest, Implied/Referenced Child Abuse, Light Angst, Domestic Fluff, Hurt/Comfort, Emotional Hurt/Comfort, Suicidal Thoughts, Mental Health Issues, Nigel Colbie has mental health issues, No beta we die like Susan, ←this work has a beta now but let the record show that I came up with that tag first and I'm proud, Complete, Dark fluff, why is that not a tag, Angst and Feels, mentioned animal death, very briefly though, Title from a Halsey Song

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by Galicia

Summary

Sometimes what seems to be the end, is only the beginning.

After Nigel follows him to the train tracks, Alex decides to change the course of their story forever. They run away from the law and make their own fate together, they kill, they hate and most importantly, they love.

;

Or, the one where Nigel never died, instead him and Alex run away together to be dangerous and happy.

Notes

There are like three people writing for this fandom and I've decided to be one of them.
A few clarifications and warnings:
I will not be describing anything too graphically, the rating is more for what's in the movie than for what I wrote, but STILL this is no fluffy work so mind the tags :)
Secondly English isn't my first language so take that into consideration, I tried my best though
UPDATE: I got a beta reader so it should be fine now.

CW: implied necrophilia

See the end of the work for more notes

More Than Life Has To Offer

Chapter Summary

> Alex makes a decision that has the potential to either save them or condemn them both for good, depends on who you ask.

Part I

"And what about you and Susan?" Nigel asked him. After everything they'd done, the question seemed offensive somehow.

"I didn't do it," Alex quickly answered. He wanted to make him believe it, he *needed* him to believe it.

"Oh, come on," Nigel said, still in obvious disbelief. "I left you with her." He sounded so sure and the way he looked at Alex felt almost accusatory, *angry* even.

But he'd been wrong. For someone who always seemed in control, someone who had the ability to get inside Alex's head like no one else could, he had missed something so important and so obvious about their relationship. At the time, Alex hadn't been able to tell him, because saying it out loud would mean admitting it to himself, to finally accept something that was utterly unacceptable, something that was somehow worse than all the other disturbing, twisted truths about himself he had already managed to embrace.

But life hadn't given him much more time to come to terms with himself.

He had been so sure that Nigel was going to kill him that night, but in hindsight, maybe he should have known that wasn't something Nigel could do. Not to him. One thing Alex did know was that pointing that shotgun at Nigel had been nothing but a bluff. He'd tried to make him understand, he wanted to tell him so much, *you're wrong, I didn't take Susan's body, she wasn't my Maraclea,* but none of that came out.

"There are no holy wars to fight Nigel!" he'd screamed instead.

Because he was a coward, because that wasn't something Nigel was ever going to believe and he had known it. Alex was a coward, because as he looked at Nigel, wet from the rain, dark cold eyes challenging him to shoot, to take his life, mere minutes after they had both buried his parents, dead from the very same shotgun he was holding, all he could think about was how beautiful Nigel looked like this, baring his life to him.

"Who's the enemy now?"

"We are," Nigel answered in a husky voice. "Because we wanted more from life than it has to offer."

And maybe that was what finally did it for him, maybe that one sentence was what Nigel needed to say to wake him up. Or maybe it was just the last drop to overflow the glass. He didn't know, nor did he care, because at that moment, he was blessed with an epiphany.

"You don't know anything," Alex hissed at him, and with shaking hands he threw the shotgun away. Nigel's eyes met his, confusion evident in them. "You're so sure of yourself, aren't you?" Alex didn't give him time to respond before he was kneeling down, his taller frame looming over Nigel.

"Well, you're *wrong,* " he insisted.

They were face to face now, breathing into each other's space, and Alex basked in the sight in front of him. Nigel, always so put together and serene even in the most aggravating situations, looking completely out of his depth. His wet hair was a mess, fierce eyes piercing a metaphorical hole into Alex, and his body was shaking slightly, either from cold or something more complicated. There was nothing else Alex could have done other than lean in and kiss him. So that's exactly what he did.

For how unprepared Nigel had seemed to be, he certainly went along with the program surprisingly fast. The kiss was rough and messy, but maybe that was their thing.

Alex pulled back first, as if he'd caught himself by surprise as well. He looked at Nigel with uncertainty, but quickly recovered. "You were wrong," he whispered just a few inches away from Nigel's lips.

"About what?" Nigel whispered back. His expression had almost completely returned to its usual menacing and seductive nature if it weren't for the slight twitch to his lips and the obvious awe in his

eyes. "What was I wrong about, Alex?"

"About Susan," Alex said, slowly closing his eyes and taking a deep breath. "It wouldn't have worked."

"Why not?" And by now he was certain that Nigel knew why but needed Alex to say it, so he did.

"Because she wasn't my lost love." Alex opened up his eyes to look back at him and found that Nigel was already waiting, giving him that wicked smile he knew so well. “I don't know if I was her only love, but she wasn't mine.”

Nigel leaned in to kiss him again and this time it went on for longer. He brusquely pushed Alex's body back until he was on top of him and suddenly they were kissing as the downpour slowed to a gentle rain. The gravel on the ground pressing into Alex's back through his clothes was a sweet reminder that everything was real. His hands found their way to Nigel's face, framing it, touching his smooth, pale skin as he bit into his lower lip.

When the sun came up, they were looking at each other, both flat on their backs, shoulders touching. Not a single word was spoken, they had time for that. A train went past them making the ground tremble, and Alex looked at the discarded shotgun lying a few meters away from them. In the cold morning, Alex thought that if life wouldn't give them what they wanted, maybe they should just reach out and grab it for themselves.

It was ironic how of all the things Nigel had done in the span of time they had known each other, this was the one to shake him to the core, the most unforgivable of them all. And that was making Alex fall in love with him.

I've Got You Under My Skin

Chapter Summary

And so they ran away

Chapter Notes

I wrote this while listening to "Crazy" by Patsy Cline on repeat (instead of the song referenced here lol)
At this point I don't know what I'm doing.

CW: Implied internalized homophobia

You can see The Emerald Necklace Here just imagine the gem being smaller

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The train was practically empty at two in the morning and the windows' rattle against their own frame was disturbingly loud.

Alex sat there, feeling his nerves on edge, as if waiting for something terrible to happen, a state of constant alert he'd recently learned to expect as soon as he woke up. He would not know peace until they were miles away from Yorkshire; of that, he was certain.

Nigel, for his part, was annoyingly unbothered as usual. He was asleep next to him on the aisle side of the cold train seat, his head gently resting against Alex's shoulder. He didn't know whether to admire Nigel's ability to remain calm while they were literally on the run, or to resent him for leaving him to worry all by himself.

Alex looked around him for the tenth time in the past thirty minutes and held the backpack on his lap impossibly closer to his chest. They were alone in the cabin except for a half asleep old man sitting three rows behind them and across the aisle, and yet he felt the need to secure each one of their belongings, in fear of someone taking them away. He barely repressed the urge to look under the seat to make sure the rest of their bags hadn't magically disappeared since the last time he'd seen them.

He was tired, but his mind simply wouldn't let him sleep.

Nigel made a small huffing noise in his sleep and Alex turned to look

at him. He was curled up against Alex, with his arms crossed over his own torso. He was probably cold, Alex could feel the chill of the night on his own skin, even under his jacket. Nigel wore a dark gray coat that was doing a poor job of keeping him warm, but he always tended to run cold anyways so it wasn't the coat's fault. Alex found that he wanted to do something about it, wanted to put his arm around Nigel's thin shoulders and share with him even the tiniest bit of body heat he could produce. But he didn't do it. Instead, he hesitantly let go of the backpack to hold it only with his left hand, and slowly reached out with his right one to place it over Nigel's left thigh.

It was still strange, being able to touch him like this. Alex hadn't gotten used to it yet, even months after the first time he'd dared to kiss him. And wasn't that something? They had made it this far, it had been *months,* and they were together, both still alive. For some reason, he felt like he had to be particularly grateful for that fact. They were ok, *for now,* his traitorous mind was quick to supply.

He dared to tighten his hold on Nigel, careful not to wake him, needing physical confirmation that he was with him, that he wasn't alone. Nigel didn't so much as stir, the fucker. He could sleep through a hurricane, that one. As if to prove it, a sudden white noise startled Alex, and then the first chords of a jazz song came on. He turned back, looking for the source of the sound. The old man, their only companion for the night, was carrying an old radio on his lap from which the music was coming. Alex stared at him in confusion, because who in their right mind would just start playing music out loud on a train at two in the morning. This guy, apparently.

The man just stared back at him, maybe challenging him to say something, and then turned away and closed his eyes, leaning back on his seat.

Apparently everyone could sleep except for Alex.

"I've got you under my skin. I've got you, deep in the heart of me."

The upbeat rhythm disturbed Alex. It wasn't loud, but the volume was high enough to upset him. When he'd told Nigel that they needed to run away, he'd never thought they'd do it to the sound of a Frank Sinatra song.

"We need to go," Alex had said that morning two months ago, when they were making their way back to Nigel's house.

"Go where?" Nigel had asked, his voice more noticeably rough than usual. They were wet from the past night's rain, and they had slept outdoors on the ground. He was most likely coming down with a cold.

"I don't know, anywhere. We can't stay here, not with…" he paused, not knowing how to address the fact that Nigel's parents were embalmed and buried under his house, Susan's murder was still being investigated, and Alex was pretty sure that he was the main suspect. "...everything that's happened" he decided upon.

Nigel hummed noncommittally. He had been kicking a loose rock all the way and he was looking down at it, seemingly not paying much attention to what Alex was saying.

"Hey!" Alex called and grabbed him by the arm, turning Nigel to look at him "I'm serious, Nigel, we have to figure out what we're going to do. I don't know about you, but I'm not planning to go to jail."

Nigel had the decorum of actually looking him in the eye, but his serious expression didn't last as he gave Alex a lopsided grin and leaned forward teasingly. "What? You're going to take me and run away with me? Who would've thought you could be such a romantic."

Alex stared at him wide eyed. He would later admit to himself, but to no one else, that in that moment he hadn't been sure what he wanted to do more: hit Nigel or kiss him. That seemed to be a theme with them, one he most certainly would grow accustomed to eventually.

They had resumed their walking after that and remained silent for the rest of the way. Alex had been able to see Nigel's smirk clearly, and he'd found it extremely infuriating.

Alex had just checked his watch at 2:15 AM when Nigel began stirring awake beside him. Alex watched him slowly open his eyes and look around in -frankly adorable- confusion, before apparently remembering where he was and why.

"Welcome back to the land of the living," Alex whispered, amused.

Nigel turned to look at him with wide eyes, as if he had forgotten whose shoulder he had been using as a pillow. He must have been still drowsy from sleep since it took him more than two seconds to reset his features into a satisfied smile.

"Were you watching me sleep?"

"I was not!" Alex dropped his own smile, an embarrassed blush appearing on his face in its place.

Nigel just laughed in response. In the background Frank Sinatra continued to sing.

I'd tried so not to give in.

I said to myself, 'This affair never will go so well'.

Alex was looking straight into Nigel's eyes, dark blue under the weak lighting in the train. They reminded him of the time he'd gone to the coast in the middle of winter as a child, and he'd thought the sea was going to swallow him whole. He'd wanted to go in, had asked the sea to make him disappear, never to be seen again. In a way, he had gotten his wish, if a little bit late.

At that moment Nigel noticed Alex's hand, still resting on his thigh. Alex tensed immediately, the feeling of having been caught making him freeze. His eyes wandered to Nigel's face, unjustifiably fearful of his reaction. Nigel for his part didn't move nor did he say anything, but from the way his eyes trailed down to look at the place where Alex's fingers met the black fabric of his jeans, and how the maliciousness of his smile melted away, it was obvious that Alex wasn't the only one still getting used to being this close to each other. Or perhaps Nigel was more shocked by the fact that Alex had been the one to initiate the contact, who could say.

Alex figured they still had time to learn, and even then, they were already making progress.

The door to Alex's room opened, and he turned around from his desk to see Nigel entering. He waited for him to close it again before speaking.

"Did you do it?"

"Of course, I told you I would, didn't I?" Nigel sat down on the bed and leaned back, supporting himself with his arms. He gave Alex a proud smile.

"How much?" Alex asked, standing to close the windows. The sun was

about to set and by the look of the clouds it would soon start raining.

"Enough to get us out of here and a little further," he assured him.

It had been a week since that fateful night, and the next morning Nigel had promised to search for his father's money, claiming that he had a bunch of cash in different places around the house. Some other things, like jewelry and guns, too, locked away in more than one safe he was sure he could figure out the codes for.

"Good," Alex nodded, leaning against the desk with his arms crossed.

Nigel nodded back and then seemed to consider something as he straightened up to look at him with all the seriousness he could muster.

"We're still going to need more. I'm going to withdraw as much as I can from both of their accounts."

"You have the passwords for those too?" Alex asked, impressed.

Nigel just raised an eyebrow at him, as if he couldn't believe he'd ask such a question.

"Right," he huffed.

"But I'm going to need time," Nigel continued. "I can't get too much out, or they'll start asking questions, the bank and everyone else."

"How much time?" Alex asked worriedly. He'd wanted to leave as soon as he'd said it to Nigel the first time, even when he knew that they needed to prepare first.

"A couple more weeks."

He pondered that, biting his lips in concern. Was a couple weeks too long in their situation? That McKenzie guy kept asking questions about Susan's death, and sooner or later people were going to notice that Nigel's parents were nowhere to be found. He'd also heard his father saying something about Eric's family pressing to know what had really happened on the train the night of his "accident". They couldn't afford having so many eyes looking their way.

A disquieting thought crossed his mind.

"Have they?" he asked, and clarified after seeing Nigel's confusion. "Asked any questions? Someone must've noticed that your parents are missing."

Nigel leaned forward to rest his elbows over his knees and cast his eyes away from Alex's, letting his gaze drift to the floor.

"Not yet. She barely ever left the house without him, and everyone at the Order knew he was dealing with some 'family matters.'" He said the last part in evident disgust, twisting his mouth in a forced smile. "I don't think they expect to see him anytime soon. We still have time."

"Enough for you to sort the other thing out?"

"Yes," Nigel insisted, raising his eyes to look at him, and Alex could have sworn he sounded offended at the question. "If anybody asks I'll just send an email in his name or something, that should buy us some more time."

Alex didn't answer, still unsure. Nigel's expression softened, and he sighed before adding, "Nobody is looking at my family now. As far as everyone knows, the Colbies are doing just fine." He grinned at the concept. Alex had to admit that he found it just as ridiculous himself as Nigel probably did.

"Alright," he reluctantly conceded.

Nigel leaned back and rested his back against the wall behind him and patted the bed next to him, signaling Alex to sit beside him.

"Come here, I want to show you something," he said excitedly.

Alex hesitated, casting a look towards the door and then slowly coming to sit beside Nigel and turning to look at him, leaving about half a meter between them.

Nigel waited for him to get settled and then he reached for something inside the pocket on his uniform blazer.

"Give me your hand," he demanded.

Alex complied, extending his right arm in between them. Nigel opened his hand and placed a golden chain in it. It had squared links, three of them at the end forming a cross which gave way to a small dark green gem as a pendant.

He looked in awe at what Nigel had just given him and turned the pendant around, watching the way the gem reflected the light in the room. It felt heavy; the chain was probably gold.

"Is this emerald?" he asked without taking his eyes away from the pendant.

"It is," Nigel confirmed proudly "I found it in one of the safes. It was my

mother's."

Upon hearing that, Alex finally raised his head and looked at him. "Why did you bring it here?"

"I want you to have it," he simply stated, smiling softly at him, the same way he did when he talked about the history of playing cards and destiny.

It made Alex shiver in response.

He let himself look again at the necklace. It was beautiful, and looked old, most likely an antique. He figured it must've been passed along one generation after the other, before or after being bought for a scandalous amount of money at some auction. It was probably worth thousands now. On top of that, it had belonged to Nigel's mother. Something about that made him feel equal parts disturbed and flattered.

And so he did what he always ended up doing whenever something related to Nigel gave him conflicted emotions. He rejected it.

"What am I gonna go with that?" he laughed, feigning amusement. "I'm not a woman, Nigel."

He wanted to take it back as soon as he'd said it.

The look Nigel gave him was devastated, before he quickly morphed his expression into one of quiet anger.

"Fine," he spat and quickly tried to retrieve the necklace from Alex.

He panicked, not knowing how to fix what he'd done. In his entire life he had never been taught what to do when someone showed him this type of affection, or how to amend his mistakes. He was young, but seventeen years seemed like a long time to have lived without ever receiving that life lesson. So really, no one could blame him when, in an attempt to mitigate the consequences of his actions, he pulled Nigel by the same hand with which he was trying to take back the necklace and kissed him.

It was a desperate move, he knew it, but it was the one he came up with.

Nigel made the pretense of refusing the kiss, if only for a couple of seconds. Alex had grabbed him by his arm as well as his hand but he could've pulled away if he had really intended to, Alex was certain. Instead, he accepted the kiss, going as far as pushing Alex against the wall, swapping their roles and taking control immediately. Alex let it happen.

Before letting go of him, Nigel bit down on his lower lip making Alex moan partly in pain and partly in pleasure. He pulled away and knelt on the bed, so he was looking at Alex from above.

"Is this how you plan to tame me, Jack?" he asked in a low voice.

Alex stared at him in disbelief. Nigel had let go of his hand but had not taken the necklace away, and he found himself holding it inside his fist and against his own chest. He brought his other hand to touch his aching lip. When he looked at his fingers, there was blood in them.

Nigel was still waiting for an answer, or maybe it had been a rhetorical question. He spoke anyway.

"It has worked so far, hasn't it?" he dared to say, even when part of him was afraid of having made Nigel angrier.

"I'll be the judge of that," he answered instead and leaned down to kiss Alex once more.

This time he was more aware and less desperate, and so he remembered where they were.

"Wait," he said and pushed Nigel away more or less gently. "Someone could come in."

Nigel paused at that and seemed to reconsider the situation. He frowned and leaned away from Alex, moving to stand up from the bed.

"You are so eager to leave, but I fear that what you want to leave behind the most will follow us wherever we go," he stated with that certainty that was so typical of him.

Alex didn't know what to say to that. What was that supposed to mean? He was always talking in riddles.

Nigel, apparently not expecting him to reply, walked away from the bed and towards the door and turned back before opening it. "I'll come back for you tonight, there are some things I need your help with back at the house."

"Like what?" Alex asked him.

"We need to dismantle the room," he simply said.

Alex nodded, that made sense. If someone ever went down there after they were gone, it was best if there was nothing for them to find.

"Fine," he agreed. "But we can't be going out every night."

"We won't have to," Nigel assured him and finally opened the door and left.

When Alex could no longer hear his steps in the hallway, he looked down at his hand. He was still holding the necklace.

Before he could've done anything about it, Alex felt Nigel's hand over his own. He watched him intertwine their fingers until they were properly holding hands.

But why should I try to resist when, baby, I know so well

I've g- you un- my s- n-

The music crackled with interference, white noise interrupting every two or three syllables. Nigel turned back to see the man struggling to make the radio work, switching between frequencies. The man didn't look up, completely focused on his task. Nigel turned back around and settled against Alex's shoulder once more.

"How long till we get to our stop?" he asked, failing to repress a yawn.

Alex barely managed to check his watch, as it took a tremendous effort to pry his eyes away from Nigel.

"Half an hour."

Nigel hummed, seemingly content with this answer, and closed his eyes.

"Are you seriously going back to sleep?" he asked him incredulously and a little amused.

Nigel just nodded by way of confirmation, not opening his eyes.

"Incredible," Alex murmured, shaking his head.

He heard the old man let out a triumphant exclamation and the song resumed its normal melodies.

I would sacrifice anything come what might

For the sake of havin' you near

In spite of the warning voice that comes in the night

And repeats, how it yells in my ear

Alex tried to relax in his seat, although the air in the cabin seemed to be getting colder with each passing minute. There was something itching at the skin on his chest and he wondered if there was such a thing as being allergic to trains. If there was, then the events of the past months of his life might as well have caused him to have a reaction.

"Don't you know, little fool, you never can win?

Why not use your mentality, step up, wake up to reality"

But each time I do just the thought of you makes me stop

Just before I begin 'cause I've got you under my skin

Alex wondered how long that song had been playing? It felt like forever.

He wasn't sure if it had been the words or how old it sounded in his ears, but something about it made him remember why he was “allergic to trains” all of a sudden. He laughed at himself internally, feeling stupid for forgetting something like this. It must've been the sleep deprivation.

He reached inside the collar of his jacket and pulled out the golden necklace that had been brushing against his skin. Alex looked at the piece of jewelry, admiring the old emerald, before putting it back inside, this time leaving the fabric of his undershirt between the necklace and his skin.

He closed his eyes and hoped he would be able to sleep for at least 25 minutes.

Chapter End Notes

Come yell at me on Tumblr

This is easy as lovers go, so don't complicate it by hesitating

Chapter Summary

The boys settle in and slowly learn how to be all by themselves

Chapter Notes

Hi! This one took me longer to write than I thought it would but it's finally here!
Huge thanks to @GrandMoffTisper for being my beta reader for this chapter as well as being such a huge support, none of this would've been possible without you <3

CW: Implied homophobia
Chapter title is from the Song "As Lovers Go" by Dashboard Confessional

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The landlady, a short woman in her mid sixties, had been polite and hadn't asked too many questions, for which Alex had been extremely thankful. She accompanied them to the third floor to see the apartment. Nigel walked behind him, letting him carry the majority of the conversation, the same as it had been at the last three places they had looked into so far, and pretty much every other human interaction they'd had ever since leaving their home.

The lady, –Imogen something, Murray? He thought she'd said her name was–, came to a stop in front of a white wooden door and began fumbling with a key ring.

"It's a bit small, like I said, but it should be fine for the two of you," she announced without raising her head to look at them; she seemed to have some trouble at finding the right key.

"It's alright, really, we were living in a dorm not that long ago, I think we can manage," Alex told her dismissively.

She looked up then, and eyed them wearily.

"How old did you boys say you were again?"

"Eighteen, ma'am" Alex was quick to supply.

She had seen the fake ID's Nigel had gotten for them from somewhere Alex had been too afraid to ask about. She was testing them, or maybe she was truly that forgetful, he was having a hard time differentiating his paranoia from reasonable concern these days. Either way, she had not been the first person they had lied to in the past months, and he was sure she would not be the last. If anything, they were facing a lifetime of telling lies. Their age was one of the smallest ones at that, they had only needed to pretend being a year older so they were able to apply to most things in most places without a legal guardian.

"This is a strange place to come to, being so young, not that many opportunities here, if you don't mind me saying it."

Alex tensed up; he had expected that people would question their choice to go to the Isle of Skye in Scotland, of all places and he was never sure of what to say to make them less suspicious.

"We just needed some space," Nigel suddenly spoke. "Somewhere private where we can be ourselves. I'm sure you can understand what that's like." He gave her a knowing smile, and Alex had the sudden realization that he'd never seen him give anyone other than himself that kind of look, the type that made it seem like he knew you and all of your secrets.

Mrs. Murray's cheeks turned a rosy color and she let out a startled laugh. "I certainly do." She turned around from them and finally opened up the door. She stepped aside and looked between Alex and Nigel with a soft smile, before letting them in. "I would have left too, had I been given the chance at your age. But it was a bit harder back then. I'm glad that you two can do it now."

Alex gave himself exactly 5 seconds to process what he'd just heard before following her indication to go inside the apartment, Nigel coming five steps behind him.

The place was indeed very small, but not unbearably so. A kitchen, one bathroom, a single bedroom, a barely-there balcony and a tiny living room with tall glass windows. The wallpaper was light cream, almost white; that was good, Nigel had complained that the previous apartment they'd seen had been too dark.

Looking at him, Alex saw Nigel assessing the small studio apartment with clinical eyes, probably trying to calculate how much it met his very specific requirements.

Mrs Murray's phone began ringing from inside the pocket in her long

floral dress. She hurriedly took it out and looked at the small screen with a frown on her face. "Apologies, I have to attend to this, I'll be right back," she said to him, and then stepped outside before he had the chance to answer.

As Alex watched Nigel open doors and count tiles, he pleaded to whatever deity listening that this would be the place that would finally please him. According to Nigel, the other apartments they'd seen had been too cold, too humid, the neighbors too noisy, and on one occasion he hadn't liked that the landlord had asked them too many personal questions. Aside from that last one, which Alex had actually agreed on –the guy had been a little bit too curious for his taste–he'd thought the others had been perfectly fine.

Nigel went inside the bedroom, opened a window and looked outside, before coming out to stand in front of him. "This one will do," he declared flatly.

"Finally!" Alex cheered, relieved.

Nigel huffed in annoyance. "It's not my fault that your standards are so low."

Alex merely shook his head in response. He just needed a roof over his head somewhere they could afford, he didn't care about anything else.

He let himself look around, trying to get used to the idea of living there for at least a year as they had discussed. It was barely furnished, but that was alright as they didn't have that many things. He looked through the open door of the bedroom and inside saw a bare queen sized mattress.

A single mattress.

"She thinks we are…" he began, locking eyes with Nigel, but was unable to finish the sentence.

Nigel gave him an unimpressed stare. "A couple?"

"Yes" he confirmed, glancing away.

"And are we not?" Nigel challenged.

Alex found himself tensing up again. He wondered when he would stop reacting that way to every implication of them being together,

even when he wanted it as much as he knew Nigel did, even when they were, in fact, together in that way and had been for months now.

"I just don't think she needs to know anything about our lives," he shrugged.

"We don't need to worry about that. Didn't you hear what she said? She *understands*."

Alex seriously doubted that. No one could possibly understand, not when it came to them.

Mrs. Murray came back, apologizing for the interruption and offering to answer all of their questions. Alex informed her of their decision and a few minutes later she brought the papers for them to sign.

He had seen the name in his new Citizen Card and passport, he had used it to introduce himself to everyone they'd met since arriving in Scotland, and yet, he felt as if he was just seeing it for the first time when he signed the lease under the name "Jack".

The thing is, it had been obvious they would be *sleeping together*. It had been obvious to Mrs. Murray, since she was very aware of how many rooms the apartment had, given that she was the owner. It was meant for a couple. The words hadn't been said out loud, but it had been implicit.

Alex was aware of this, but once again he'd tried to put up a fight, pretending that not everyone knew.

And wasn't that a terrifying thing to think about.

Everyone knew.

Maybe that's why the previous landlord they'd talked with had asked so many questions. Maybe that's why the lady sitting next to them on the Ferry had been giving them the side eye all the way to Skye.

The thought made Alex's stomach twist in knots and his heart race uncontrollably.

The first night at the apartment he'd been so exhausted he hadn't been able to think about it that much. Nigel had been too preoccupied setting up his *stuff* in the ridiculously tiny room next to the bathroom that Alex had originally mistaken for a walk-in closet, but that had turned out to be a small compartment. It was solely equipped with a

desk and a chair and had one window that took almost the entirety of a wall.

Nigel had immediately claimed it as his, and Alex had seen him take the bag where he kept his *dead pets*, as Alex had begun to call them, inside. He'd left him alone after that.

By the time he went to sleep, Nigel was still in the shower, and when he woke up the next morning, he was already rummaging around in the kitchen, only to inform Alex that they didn't have anything to eat. For all he knew, Nigel might not have slept that night at all, although he looked well rested.

They spent the entire day looking for the cheapest, most basic things they needed to live like actual human beings.

That night, however, Alex had been unable to ignore his proximity with Nigel, as he climbed into bed next to him wearing soft sleeping clothes. They had slept in the same room before, but that had been long ago, when things were very different between them. And being honest with himself, Alex knew that even then, sharing a space with Nigel had been a struggle in many ways.

As he laid down next to him, Alex went stiff, while Nigel seemed to be completely unaffected.

It was stupid, they had touched, kissed, they had done a lot more than that. How could sleeping be any more intimate than anything they had done before. It couldn't be. And yet, it somehow was.

Alex had laid over their brand new set of sheets, staring at the ceiling in the dark, unseeing, when Nigel began laughing quietly next to him.

"What?" Alex snapped at him, more confused than he was angry.

"You're ridiculous," Nigel replied with amusement.

Alex was about to retort but anything he could have said died on his tongue the moment he felt the body next to him shift in the dark, and then without a warning, Nigel's arms were coming from under the covers to surround him. Alex's breath caught in his throat as he felt Nigel's cold hands over his arms and his warm breath on his ear.

"What are you so afraid of, Jack?" he whispered, and then a little louder said, "There's nothing that can hurt us, we are home."

He felt like he needed to argue with that. They were living in a practically empty apartment, they had no one else but each other, and everything they had said about themselves for the past weeks had been a lie. This couldn't be home, and there were about a million things that could hurt them at any moment, were they not careful enough. In spite of that, Alex was horrified to feel the familiar welling of tears behind his eyes at hearing Nigel call whatever they had a *home*, *their* home on top of that.

He shifted around to face Nigel and under the faint light coming through the windows, barely a couple of centimeters from his own face, he could feel more than see his pleased smirk.

"Shut up" he grunted out in response and blinking back his emotions so that Nigel wouldn't see them.

It didn't matter how much it pained him to admit it, it was one of those times when Nigel had simply won. And against his own judgment he decided to give in.

That night he slept with Nigel's head over his chest, a strangely comforting weight on top of his restless heart, and he woke up feeling more rested than he had in what felt like years.

"Fuck"

Alex cursed and sprinted towards the kitchen. He had fallen asleep on the couch trying to fix an old alarm clock that had fallen and stopped working a few days ago. He'd forgotten that there was a pot of boiling potatoes that needed to be turned off eventually, and he would have probably remained asleep if someone hadn't rung the doorbell.

He yelled for Nigel to get the door and hurried to open the lid of the pot. A cloud of steam and a bubbling sound greeted him and he had to step back a little to avoid getting his face burned.

"Bloody hell!" He waved off the steam and looked inside the pot. The water had almost completely evaporated, but the potatoes were salvageable. He turned the stove off and put the lid back on the pot.

He could hear Imogen's voice coming from the hallway outside the door, her cheerful tone and the steady rhythm of her chatting barely pausing to let Nigel get a few syllables in.

Alex turned towards the kitchen cabinets and opened a few drawers

and doors, searching for the package of salt they had just bought. They'd been living there for almost two weeks and he still couldn't remember where things were.

The sound of the front door closing was heard and soon after, Nigel appeared to drop an envelope on the tiled counter.

"You have mail," he announced.

"Mail?" Alex asked without turning around. He grabbed some scissors and began to open the bag of salt to pour it inside a small plastic container. It had been Imogen -as she had asked them repeatedly to call her- who'd told them of this method to store salt. She said it helped with humidity. Alex didn't know if that was true, but he chose to believe her.

He was about to sprinkle some of it inside the pot when Nigel grabbed his hand and stopped him.

"You're supposed to add the salt *before* you boil it, not after," he reprimanded, not for the first time that week.

Alex stilled, the lid in one hand and salt in the other, making him look comically frozen. Nigel's chest was against his back, his chin barely raising above Alex's right shoulder.

In an act of pointless defiance, he brusquely brushed Nigel's grip off his arm and let the salt fall inside the pot before covering it with the lid again.

"You can do it yourself next time, then," Alex said, turning to look back at Nigel.

"*I will*," he stated and leaned forward as he said it, making Alex struggle not to step back in response. "Especially since you won't be here during the day anymore."

"What?"

Nigel went around him to grab a wooden spoon and began poking the contents of the pot with a disapproving frown.

"Imogen brought a letter for you, said they must have gotten the apartment numbers mixed up, happens all the time."

Alex went to look at the envelope on the counter. He recognized the

name of the sender immediately. It was from a library at which he'd had a job interview a few days ago. The place was extremely understaffed, and the owner was an old fashioned kind of guy, who had been very surprised that Alex wanted to work there. He'd said that young people these days only cared about their computers and that books had been forgotten. One would think that the guy would've given the job to him right away, but he liked to take his time to think things through, apparently. It had been quite irritating, but Alex liked books just fine and he needed a job.

He opened the envelope and read the letter inside. They had given him the job.

"How did you know that it said yes?"

Nigel just shrugged, cryptic as ever.

Alex shook his head, resigned to the fact that there were some things that he just wouldn't be able to understand about him.

"Imogen wanted me to tell you that Helen says hi" Nigel added after a few minutes.

Helen was –in her own words– Imogen's partner. She had introduced herself a few days after they had moved in, had seen Nigel struggling to carry three grocery bags and called him "toothpick boy". Alex thought that the dumbfounded expression Nigel had given in response had been hilarious. She was straightforward and loved to make people uncomfortable just for the laughs and Alex loved her. He wasn't sure if landlords, or landladies, were supposed to be this friendly and he made sure to remind himself of how inconvenient it would be if Imogen and Helen got too close to them. But for now it was nice to have someone else to talk to, other than Nigel. Someone who didn't *know* them. They had seemed to take a special liking for him and Nigel anyway, a sort of kinship. If they only knew.

"You knew she was gay, when we first met," Alex said then and he wasn't sure why he had done it. "The moment you saw her, you knew. How?"

He knew he was asking the wrong questions, so it didn't really surprise him when Nigel's answer was less than satisfactory.

"You can't just ask that, Alex, it's impolite"

"Come on, don't give me that." Alex moved over to lean on the wall

next to Nigel, crossing his arms over his chest. "You know what I mean"

Nigel took a bowl from one of the cabinets and began pouring the potatoes inside of it and once again spoke without bothering to look at him. "Do I?"

Alex looked at him intently, until Nigel looked up to meet his eyes and sighed before giving in. "I knew, the same way she knew about us"

"I'm not gay," he spat, like the mere insinuation aggravated him.

"Right, dear Susan, you really did like her, didn't you?" It wasn't a question.

Alex wanted to argue. Bringing up Susan's name in a casual conversation like that felt wrong. That was definitely what bothered him and not the implications of Nigel's previous observation, surely.

"Don't talk about her like that," he said, but he didn't manage to pour enough strength into it. It came out more as a resigned complaint, the kind one says out loud just for the principle of it and not with the intention of actually being heard.

The glass bowl hit the counter loudly, it didn't break but Alex couldn't help but jump in surprise just as if it had. To anyone else, Nigel might have seemed calm and composed, if a little bit serious, but Alex could see his tensed shoulders and the way his lips had turned into a flat line. Susan was still a complicated subject, although sometimes it felt like everything was.

"You can keep doing this, whatever it was. I was in the middle of something." Nigel turned around then, and walked away from the kitchen, leaving Alex behind. The potatoes in the bowl forgotten.

He stood there alone in the kitchen for a few minutes trying to figure out where exactly he had messed up.

He didn't come up with any insightful answer.

Four hours later they'd already had dinner and the potatoes had been too salty, as predicted by Nigel.

Alex went into the bedroom, two warm mugs of tea in his hands.

Nigel was sitting on the bed, his back resting against the headboard and an open book on his lap. He wasn't reading though, instead his eyes were set on the window, where raindrops were slowly trailing down the glass panes.

"Were you planning to go out?" Alex asked jokingly.

Nigel only briefly glanced in his direction before looking back outside "There was a raven outside, just now," he said in a low tone.

"A raven?" Alex asked, raising a brow. He sat next to Nigel and handed him one of the mugs, the blue one, because that was the one that Nigel liked.

"It was clacking on the window with its beak. I think-" He paused to close the book and put it aside and grabbed the offered mug with both hands. "I think it was calling for me," he finished.

"Are you talking to birds now?" Alex joked.

Nigel shook his head, frowning at the mug as if it had personally insulted him, but he didn't say anything in return.

Alex's smile slowly disappeared. He'd thought that by now Nigel's mood would have improved, but it seemed that it wasn't the case.

"Hey," he called and Nigel hummed in acknowledgment "I have to start working at the library tomorrow."

"And?" Nigel prompted, seemingly uninterested.

"And…" Alex pressed, "are you going to be alright all by yourself here?"

At that Nigel let out a humorless laugh and looked up from his hands. "I am no stranger to solitude, I think I can stand to be without you for a few hours"

"You could find something too, you know that, right? We could certainly use the extra money."

Nigel brought the mug to his lips and tentatively took a sip. Tea was one of the only things Alex knew how to make in the kitchen without messing up at least three times. He'd made Nigel's extra sweet, with honey, not sugar, that part was important.

"If I get a job too, then who would stay home to be your little

housewife?"

Alex could physically feel the heat making his cheeks turn red and Nigel's malicious grin let him know that it was just as visible.

"Is that what you think you are now?" he countered.

"It's what you let me be"

"I don't *let* you be anything," Alex argued, almost desperately. He was well aware of their situation, he knew that they only had each other anymore. He also knew that Nigel had a tendency to find a reason, a purpose and become obsessed with it and the idea of him making Alex his purpose was equal parts alluring and frightening. He didn't want to be the sole dictator of Nigel's life and he told him as much. "I don't own you."

Nigel put the half empty mug on the night stand, where the condensation would surely leave a stain on the wood, and he leaned forward to look at Alex.

"I know you don't," he said and stood up from the bed, walking past Alex and towards the door. Alex watched him walk away and noticed that he was barefoot, his feet probably freezing with no socks on.

As he was about to leave, Nigel turned around and said, "Your spade is being left unused, Jack. Don't forget what I am".

Alex kept his eyes on him as he left the room, and he thought he heard something tapping on the window, but when he turned his eyes away from Nigel, to look at it, there was nothing there.

Chapter End Notes

I am aware that I did that thing they do in movies when the characters don't finish their food/drinks before leaving. I'm not sorry.

Come yell at me on Tumblr

The Maiden

Chapter Summary

Nigel is getting a little bit impatient

Chapter Notes

This was actually the first thing I wrote for this story!
I posted it on my (now deleted by Tumblr staff because they hate me) old Tumblr account.

Again, corrected by GrandMoffTisper.
I should probably delete that "no beta we die like Susan" tag but the first chapters are just me and besides, I really love that tag.

Two months in, they had managed to survive with each other. They even had a routine going on. Every morning on weekdays, except for Thursdays, they went to get breakfast somewhere, like that first day when they had noticed that they didn't have anything to eat. After that, Alex went to work at the library and Nigel went back to the apartment. He still refused to get a job.

"You fancy her?"

Alex startled at the sound of Nigel's voice. They had just left the coffee shop and it was freezing outside, the only source of heat being the two paper cups he was holding. He looked at Nigel and reluctantly handed him one, already feeling his hands getting colder.

"What are you talking about?"

"You know…" Nigel trailed off and looked inside the shop through the glass windows as they were passing by. Alex followed his eyes to see what he was looking at.

Inside he spotted the barista he'd just bought their coffee from –Lynda, if he remembered correctly. She was leaning over the counter, smiling at some customers as she took their orders. Alex had discovered the coffee shop just three weeks ago but it was already his favorite thing about the town so far.

Lynda had the early morning shift, and she was always nice and welcoming and she'd memorized Alex's order by the end of the first week. She was a small, thin girl, no more than 20 years old, her light

brown hair always gathered in a low ponytail with bangs framing her juvenile face.

Alex looked back to Nigel, meeting his glaring eyes and knowing grin. Understanding what he had meant, he felt his blood run cold.

"Shut up," he half whispered, shaking his head and beginning to walk faster away from the coffeeshop, knowing Nigel would follow.

"Don't be embarrassed, Alex, I know how you like them." To anyone else Nigel's tone could be described as lighthearted, teasing even. But he knew better than that, he could hear the cold danger in his voice.

"And how is that?" he asked in a rhetorical manner.

Nigel answered anyway. "Sweet, small enough to tuck their head under your chin, baby faced."

Alex pondered that for a second before shaking his head.

"I don't like Lynda like that," he denied.

"Lynda? You know her name now?"

"So do you. You come here everyday, same as me." Alex hadn't slowed his pace even though they had left the shop behind by a few meters now, but Nigel was keeping up with him, walking by his side.

"But I never talk to her like you do."

"That's because you are an antisocial freak."

"I see the way you two talk," Nigel continued, ignoring his comment. "You're so…"-he smiled wickedly–"friendly, to each other"

"She's a barista, she's friendly to everyone," Alex retorted.

"But you're not," came Nigel's response.

They turned a corner to an almost empty street and Alex abruptly stopped walking, turning to grab Nigel's upper arm with his free hand. "Stop what you're doing, right now," he muttered in a low voice, staring down into Nigel's eyes.

"I'm not doing anything," Nigel assured him, but his eyes were glinting with amusement and the smile hadn't left his face.

"Don't play dumb," Alex pushed. "She's not a threat to you. I don't *fancy* her so you can stop your plotting." He looked around, making sure no one was listening. Seeing no one nearby, he whispered, "The last thing we need is you killing someone when we're so close to home."

He brusquely let go of Nigel's arm, his smaller and thinner frame stumbling a couple of steps back with the force.

Alex resumed his path, this time walking much more slowly, enough for him to take a sip of his drink without spilling it. It was already cooling down. Nigel approached him until they were once again walking side by side.

It was always like this nowadays, Alex thought. No matter what he did or where he went, Nigel was always beside him, sometimes whispering in his ear, sometimes holding his hand. Nigel's presence along with his depredatory nature had become a constant in his life and something he was starting to find comfort in.

But still, it had been so hard for them to find a place where they could be safe, at least for a few months until they moved on to the next place –preferably in another continent– that having that safety stripped away from them because of something Nigel did… Alex would rather not go through that.

For a few minutes they didn't say anything, and he thought that Nigel had for once resigned himself to obey his requests, until they passed a trashcan where Nigel threw his empty cup, the sound startling him once again. Alex had been so lost in his head he wasn't sure he had even seen him drink from it.

"You say you don't care about the maiden, and yet, you're so quick to defend her," Nigel mused, and for a second Alex thought he heard a tinge of sadness, or perhaps disappointment, mixed with his usually teasing tone.

Alex turned in his direction and saw Nigel looking down as he walked. From that angle he couldn't see his eyes and that worried him, as he could not guess Nigel’s state of mind the way he often did.

"I think it's pretty reasonable of me not wanting you to kill an innocent person," he muttered. "...again," he added.

They reached their destination, just two blocks away from the coffeeshop and into a small square, where they usually parted ways.

Coming to stand next to a bench, Alex placed his half empty paper cup on it and turned to look at Nigel.

"I have to go now or I'll be late to work and you know how Mr. Campbell gets about that," he said calmly. "I need you to promise me you're not going to do anything." He imparted all the seriousness he could into his words, begging for Nigel to listen.

Nigel just looked at him and smiled. The bastard. Alex felt all the patience he'd tried to conjure up draining away from him.

"Listen to me," he demanded angrily. "If you lay a hand on her I swear to God I'll--"

"You'll what?" Nigel challenged him. "What would you do then, *Jack* ?" he pushed, leaning closer and closer to him with each word, until Alex could feel the soft caress of Nigel's breath on his own face.

His mind went blank, all he could see were those ice cold eyes, so in tune with the weather, staring right into his soul as they knew so well how to do. Nigel's skin, pale as ever, slightly reflected the weak morning radiance coming from the sun. His soft features and short frame were a hard contrast with the defiance in his husky voice and the darkness that Alex knew lived in his mind. He found himself looking at Nigel's rosy lips and thought that if Nigel tilted his head down just a little bit, Alex would be able to cradle it under his chin. *I know how you like them* , he'd said.

And just like that, he had nothing to say. It was absurd to think that at this point, were Nigel to hurt someone, Alex would do anything other than grab his arm, gather their things, and run away with him again. Even if the very thing he should be running away from was the person he always ended up following.

He sobered up then and took two steps away from Nigel. "I have to go," he merely said and turned around. As he left the square he swore he could feel a set of eyes following him all the way to work.

He spent the entire day in a state of paranoia, looking at his phone, refreshing the news on the web, side eyeing the small TV in the library, half expecting to see a headline stating "Local barista found dead", but nothing of that sort happened.

That afternoon when he got back to their apartment, the streets already dark with the descending night, he entered hesitantly through the door, not even bothering to turn the light on in the small living

room, nor did he take his shoes and coat off. Back in the kitchen the smell of boiling soup welcomed him, and he found Nigel meticulously slicing pieces of what looked to be chicken breast. His long hands moved almost artistically, with the skill of someone who was well accustomed to breaking through flesh with a knife. He didn't look up from his task to greet Alex.

"Welcome home," he said, as if they were normal people living a normal life.

"How was your day?" Alex followed along with the delusion.

"Uneventful, as always," he said, and with an efficient movement he sliced the last piece of white meat and poured it all inside an aluminum bowl.

As he turned to wash his hands in the sink, Alex watched him, fixated on the way his thin hands moved under the water. His knuckles were slightly reddened, and Alex knew that even inside their well-heated home, they'd be cold to the touch, as they always seemed to be. Drying himself with a kitchen towel, Nigel turned around to look at Alex with a smile that quickly transformed into a disapproving frown.

"You didn't take off your shoes! You're gonna make the floor all muddy," he said, aggravated, as if that were the worst thing that could possibly happen to them, and he moved closer to assess the damage.

Alex didn't respond. He was transfixed by the domesticity of the scene in front of him. Nigel, in the kitchen, a kitchen that was *theirs* , wearing soft pajama pants and a white t-shirt, obviously making them dinner while he was waiting for Alex to get back from work.

He'd never had one, but he wondered if this is what it felt like to come home.

"And you're not wearing an apron," he managed to say, because he was incapable of not challenging Nigel. "You're gonna get yourself all wet."

He reached out with his right hand to softly touch the fabric over Nigel's stomach, where water had splashed over it, making the white t-shirt look darker. Nigel's breath both audibly and visibly stilled for a second, before resuming its normal rhythm.

"It will dry," he argued with no real heat in his voice.

"And so will the floor."

They stood there looking into each other's eyes for a minute, neither one daring to look away, like it was a contest. Maybe it was. Alex was sure that to Nigel, everything was a competition, he just wasn't sure what the prize was most of the time. Without thinking too much, he leaned down to press a soft kiss to Nigel's forehead, the warm skin a pleasant contrast to his freezing lips. Nigel didn't move, but Alex knew he was smiling, even if he couldn't see. He didn't try to show affection in return, because Nigel never reciprocated, he only acted first and waited for Alex to reciprocate. Whenever Alex was the first one to move, it was like a declaration saying that Nigel had won this round. Because this was normal, this was what they always did. Because Alex was accustomed to Nigel's antics, just as much as Nigel was accustomed to handling knives.

He heard the sound of a pressure cooker going off, and as Nigel slowly stepped away from him to attend to it, he thought that the coffee that morning hadn't been that good, and that maybe tomorrow they should find someplace where they sell good tea.

The demons are closer than they appear

Chapter Summary

The fallout

Chapter Notes

Happy New Year to everyone still here!
I'm afraid that you're going to continue being mad at Alex for a bit oops

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It's raining again.

Alex can't see so much as hear the water hitting the train tracks in the dark.

He can see himself, though, and he's holding a shotgun to Nigel's face.

Nigel is saying something, but he can't hear him.

Alex tries to get closer, but he can't move.

Where is he, really? He's in front of Nigel, under the rain, next to the train tracks. But he's also outside of his body, somehow. And he can't fucking move.

He watches as Nigel slowly raises his arms and grabs the shotgun. He's going to push it away, right?

He doesn't.

Instead, he says something and this time Alex can hear him.

"Pray for me" he says.

Alex tries to scream, "What are you doing?!" But no sound comes out when he opens his mouth.

"Pray for yourself," Nigel continues, and his hand gets dangerously close to the trigger. The barrel of the gun is pressed right under his eye. "We are one now."

Then there's a deafening sound.

The next thing Alex knows is that he's back inside himself, no longer helplessly seeing everything play out from outside. But it's too late to do anything now.

He holds Nigel's body against his chest. He can't look at his face, there's so much blood. And Nigel is so, so cold.

Alex looks up to the night sky, raindrops are falling on his face with the same speed they did on the tracks, but he can't feel them. He thinks he's crying, but he can't know for sure.

Nigel is dead.

He can't feel anything else.

Alex woke up, the muscles in his body feeling painfully rigid. He stared at the ceiling above him, wide eyed and with his heart racing. It wasn't like one of those nightmares from which you wake up screaming, sitting up in bed instantly. It was simply a silent terror that left his mind disoriented and his skin gleaming with cold sweat.

Turning to his right he looked at the digital clock and saw that it was three in the morning.

Alex let himself take a deep breath, relieved.

But his heart wouldn't stop hammering inside his chest.

He closed his eyes and tried to calm himself. That night had been over half a year ago. Nigel was right beside him now, so close that Alex could hear him breathing. They were ok, he was ok.

He shifted and turned around on the bed to look at Nigel. He was asleep, facing the window and with his back turned to Alex. He had pushed the covers away during the night and had curled in on himself, as he often did. It was the middle of June and although summer was right around the corner, it would still get cold during the night.

Hesitantly, trying not to wake him, Alex pressed himself against Nigel's back and hugged him from behind. He waited a couple of seconds, lying still until he was sure that Nigel was still sleeping before he let himself relax. He buried his face in Nigel's hair and breathed in, the sweet smell of honey filling his lungs. That overpriced shampoo Alex had reluctantly agreed to buy was finally paying off.

In his arms, Nigel's smaller frame fit perfectly. His skin was soft and smooth where Alex's hands touched him, and the constant pattern of his breathing was surprisingly reassuring. After a nightmare like the one he'd just had, Alex could use some of that. And so he held Nigel a little tighter and counted each breath he took until they were both asleep.

Unexpectedly, that morning when Alex got out of bed, Nigel was still sleeping. Alex didn't wake him as, there was no need for that, but he couldn't help finding it odd. Nigel was usually already in the kitchen, or taking a shower by the time Alex woke up, even when he wasn't the one who had to go to work. He would get up at 6:00 AM everyday like clockwork, except for that morning. Maybe he was finally getting used to not having a schedule, since they weren't at school anymore. Although Alex himself was quite fond of his routines and he'd thought it was the same for Nigel.

Alex made his way to the kitchen and went through the cabinets, willing his half-asleep brain to remember where Nigel had said that he'd put the coffee. Alex should know, since he was the only one who actually drank coffee and the reason why they even had any at the apartment. He was slowly realizing how much he still didn't know about their things, simply because it was Nigel who took care of them.

Eventually he managed to make himself some coffee, take a shower, and even begin to get dressed, but in all that time, Nigel still didn't get out of bed. When Alex went to check on him, he was lying face down, with his head on Alex's pillow, effectively taking all the space in bed he could possibly occupy with his body. Alex couldn't help but smile at the sight.

The sun had yet to come up when Alex heard the sound of something hitting the glass doors to the balcony. Intrigued and partially concerned, he went to check for the source of the sound. It was unlikely that someone would try to rob them, being on the third floor, but it was certainly not impossible. He moved the curtains aside but couldn't see anything so he turned on the lights in the balcony. Outside, a big black bird was perched on top of the wrought iron chair they never used, looking straight at him through the glass. It was a disquieting sight to find so early in the morning. Alex stood there, watching the bird –was it a raven?– like they were having a staring contest, until it flew away, seemingly bored with the situation.

Strange , he thought.

"You are leaving?"

Alex turned around with a start to see Nigel, who was coming out of the bedroom. His hair was disheveled and he was wearing one of Alex's t-shirts. It was a little too big for him, the loose neck showing his collarbones. He was blinking slowly, like his eyelids were too heavy.

"Jesus, Nigel," Alex cursed. "You can't just do that!" He shook his head, not expecting him to answer, and went into the room.

He pulled a dark green jacket from the closet and stood in front of the mirror as he put it on.

Some people, Nigel included, thought that Alex was *vain* , narcissistic even. He didn't know if he agreed with that assessment or not. He thought highly of himself, that much was true, but he didn't think he paid that much attention to his looks. But maybe that was about to change. After all, he had spent the most part of his life wearing a uniform, bound by dress codes and limited by his father's constant judgment. So Alex figured that he could spend a little longer in front of the mirror, if he wanted, look at his green eyes and the freckles on his face, and comb his hair with his fingers until he was satisfied with the result. Better than being like Nigel, who didn't look at himself at all.

"Are you, then?" Nigel insisted a few seconds later, coming to stand behind him.

Alex frowned at Nigel's reflection in the mirror. "Am I what?"

"Leaving. It's Saturday, you don't have work today."

"Mr Campbell wanted me to go help him with some stuff that's getting delivered today," Alex clarified. It had been a last minute request but he'd agreed to do it, and Mr. Campbell had said he was going to pay him the extra hours.

"You hadn't mentioned you would be leaving." Nigel sounded upset, and he was staring daggers at Alex.

"I don't know, Nigel. I guess I forgot," he said dismissively and turned to properly face Nigel, crossing his arms. The sudden inquiry was obviously meant to be accusatory. Of what, he wasn't sure.

"You forget about me so easily, then," Nigel replied quietly, looking

away.

"Oh, come on!" Alex spat, annoyed. "You're just being dramatic now." He stepped away and went to get his wallet from the drawer on the nightstand. When he turned around to leave the room, Nigel was standing right in front of him, looking up at Alex in defiance.

"Was I supposed to wake up alone, not knowing where you were?" he asked.

"I wasn't expecting you to be asleep so late, so let's start with that." Alex felt the need to justify himself, although he found the altercation to be entirely uncalled for. "And it wouldn't be a problem if you had bought a mobile, or got a job, like I told you to, but you keep refusing to do either," he accused angrily.

Nigel didn't immediately answer, just glared at him. Alex took the opportunity to finally walk away from him, but as he stepped into the living room he heard Nigel again, following a few steps behind him.

"This is not what I should be doing, it's not what either of us should be doing, Jack."

"What are you even talking about?" Alex asked, not bothering to face him as he went to grab his phone from where it was lying on the coffee table.

"You know very well what I'm talking about," Nigel insisted, but Alex simply ignored him, deciding that he wouldn't be paying attention to him.

Nigel didn't appreciate it.

"Look at me when I'm talking to you!" Nigel shouted, rushing to grab his arm to turn him around in a sudden burst of rage that had even Alex alarmed.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Alex snapped, and he pushed him away with a force he hadn't entirely intended to use. Nigel's back hit the wall behind him and he stared at Alex, wide eyed.

Alex stared back, and he was certain that his expression must have been a mirror of Nigel's own. He was angry, but mostly confused. For the second time that day, his heart was racing a million times faster than it should and his lungs were struggling to breathe in and out without hyperventilating.

Nigel was the first one to break the silence. "You said that we would run away, that we could make our own story," he said in a far calmer tone than the last words that had come out of his mouth. "Did you mean that at all?"

Alex had promised Nigel that and so much more, and although some of his promises hadn't been explicitly said, he'd meant every one of them. He could admit that he had been so focused on surviving that he had forgotten to fulfill some of those promises.

"Tell me, what's the point of living this way, when we are meant for so much more," Nigel continued. He was still pressed against the wall where Alex had pushed him, but he seemed to be curling in on himself, his arms crossing over his chest as he hunched down slightly without ever taking his eyes away from Alex. "I have been waiting for you, to find some peace, so we could find our path again. But you've forgotten who we are, who *I* am and where we come from."

"Damn it, Nigel," Alex breathed out, exasperated. "I thought we were over this."

" *Over* this?" Nigel's eyes widened. "Did you expect me to forget what I know in my heart is true?" His voice faltered and his expression made Alex fear for him. "How could you give up so easily? After everything we did to protect our legacy. Come on, Alex, don't tell me you forgot already. I know you believe in it. You wouldn't have come with me if you didn't." He stepped away from the wall and slowly approached Alex, reaching out to him with his arms. "We are meant for much more than this, Jack."

It was the sight of Nigel with his arms outstretched in a too familiar gesture, asking for something that Alex wasn't sure he understood, that made him finally lose what remained of his patience.

"Stop calling me Jack!" he hissed at Nigel, taking a step back. "You know that's not my name."

In truth, he wasn't sure what he believed anymore. At some point in their story, he had understood what Nigel believed in. He had read about his ancestors and had thought about his father's tales, about the bravery of men that had caused them to be cast away as heretics, and he had seen himself in them. He'd believed, too. He didn't know if he believed that there was a higher purpose to his own existence, not anymore, but he had chosen to believe in Nigel and in his cause. Once they had stepped away from all that, as soon as he saw himself free to

be his own person, to take what he wanted and ask for neither permission nor forgiveness, the thought of a fate determined by destiny had started to feel too constricting.

"But it is, isn't it, Jack?" Nigel came closer to him. "It *is* your name, you claimed it as such and let everyone, not just me, call you by it."

Mere centimeters away from him, Alex could see Nigel's eyes glistening with tears and the way his jaw and shoulders tensed up as his body trembled in a way that he hadn't before, not even when they had been under the winter rain.

"You keep denying it, denying *me*. Why do you act like you don't believe in any of this, when you have allowed *so much* ?" His voice broke with the last word and he took a deep breath before he continued. "Tell me, what else could be strong enough to keep us together, after everything, if not destiny. If we're not meant to do something important, then what has kept us here and alive? What has kept you with me?"

So much,. Alex thought. There was so much that kept him from leaving. From that very first day when he had looked at Nigel from across the room, he had known that he would never be able to look away from him. He had been waiting for Nigel his whole life and maybe it was destiny that had ledt them to find each other, but the decision to *be together* had been only theirs.

If only Nigel could see that. If only Alex had the strength to put that into words.

"And what are we meant to do? Tell me, Nigel," Alex pressed. He should know better than to push Nigel, but there was so little he knew yet about self control, about Nigel's own limits, that he couldn't stop himself, couldn't walk away from a fight. "So what if we're meant to do something else? Huh? We're here now and we are alive, *you* are alive. Can't you see how important that is?"

He was being a hypocrite, and he was aware of that. He hadn't realized how important it was that he still had Nigel with him, that he had kept him safe and sound all these months. He hadn't known how transcendental that was until very recently.

As a tear finally fell from Nigel's eye and made its way across his cheek, Alex thought of raindrops falling over his cold body in the middle of the night.

"My life is being wasted," Nigel whispered. His arms had fallen against his sides. "You are so blind, you can't see the patterns, you can't see us for who we are because you are too afraid of what it'll mean."

"I am not. Afraid." Alex shortened the distance between them, making Nigel stumble on his feet when he tried to take a step back. "You think that you know so much about me. You're just making shit up to justify yourself. I don't need *destiny* or some lost bloodline to stay with you. Now who's really afraid, Nigel?"

A long moment passed, where they just looked at each other. Nigel was teary eyed and tense, staring up at Alex with the most heartbreaking expression he had ever seen on the boy in the time they had known each other. Once again, another too familiar sight that Alex would have rather forgotten. But his own rage was making him impulsive. Alex Forbes was *not afraid*. It was not something he allowed himself to be.

In a moment of apparent clarity, he stepped away from Nigel and made what he thought was the right decision.

"I'm leaving," he stated and he took the keys from the counter and went to open the door.

Maybe he had been expecting some answer, or he wanted Nigel to ask him to stay, or perhaps the guilt was already starting to rear its ugly head in Alex's mind, but for whatever reason, he looked back inside before leaving.

In the living room Nigel was staring at the spot on the floor where Alex had been standing mere seconds ago. The sight made something churn uncomfortably in Alex's chest, made him think of what-if's and things that had never happened.

He closed the door, convincing his conscience that Nigel would be fine. They both would be.

Going down the stairs he told himself that he just needed to get some fresh air. He had an appointment after all.

Mr. Campbell had sent Alex to the second floor to put some new books on the shelves, and with that he would be done. He had spent the entire morning setting up the new computer downstairs and his eyes were burning with exhaustion.

The pile of books was getting smaller by the minute as he organized them by genre, year, author and title. The silence in the library that had previously brought him peace and comfort now felt suffocating, as it let his very loud thoughts haunt him with no distractions.

Since the day he had kissed Nigel for the first time, he'd never doubted his own reasons. He had known what he had to do and he had known why he needed to do it. Or at least he thought he did. In reality, they had never properly discussed it. One thing had been clear: they had to go, and that had been Alex's sole preoccupation for half a year. He had been so caught up in the logistics of keeping them safe, keeping Nigel safe, away from anyone who could find them, that he hadn't sat down to even think what they were going to do after that.

They had never talked about it, not really. They never did. Their relationship was based on a guessing game with no written rules, in which both Nigel and Alex were constantly fighting for dominance.

Alex was so lost in his own head, working almost automatically as he arranged the bookshelves, that he only noticed the book he was holding when he read the title for the third time.

A copy of *"A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man"* was in his hand. He opened it without thinking and went through the pages until he found a familiar passage.

"His lips would not bend to kiss her. He wanted to be held firmly in her arms, to be caressed slowly, slowly, slowly. In her arms he felt that he had suddenly become strong and fearless and sure of himself. But his lips would not bend to kiss her."

The words felt like an echo from a past life as he read them to himself. They conjured the image of Nigel, standing in front of a classroom, reading them out loud. Alex couldn't quite remember how he had felt that day, as he listened to him –the memory had been altered by his current feelings– but he could recall not being able to look away. In that moment he'd had the sensation that Nigel had been addressing him directly, that the words on the page were a message for him.

Now, he closed the book and placed it on its designated place on the bookshelf and wondered if he had ever really understood any of Nigel's messages, or if he'd just wrongly assumed he had.

A sudden croak drew Alex's attention. Turning to his left, he saw a raven trying to get in, peeking its head through one of the windows.

Alarmed and partially startled, he ran towards the bird making shooing noises at it until he managed to scare it away. As he closed the window he heard someone walking towards him.

"Jack?" Mr. Campbell's voice came from behind him. "What's the matter?"

"Sorry, Mr. Campbell, just some bird trying to get in," he answered, turning to look at the man. "A raven. I don't know why but they seem to be everywhere."

"Ah, yes!" He said coming to stand in front of Alex. "I've been seeing them around. There shouldn't be that many of them this time of year." Mr Campbell looked down with a pensive expression for a couple of seconds and then looked back at Alex with a smile. "Must be that climate change people keep talking about!"

"Yeah," Alex agreed noncommittally. "Maybe."

Mr. Campbell was a short man, a good twenty centimeters shorter than Alex, but he was the kind of person that seemed bigger simply for their overwhelming presence. He was set in his own ways, and it took an excessive amount of patience to argue with him –not that Alex had ever done it, but he'd seen other people try.

"Is something the matter, Jack?" Alex didn't realize that he had zoned out, and his boss was looking at him in concern. "That bird didn't bite you, did it?"

"No!" he quickly assured him. "I'm fine, sir, I've just got a lot on my mind" Alex admitted and immediately regretted revealing that little piece of information. He wasn't in the mood for small talk.

As expected, his comment only made the other man frown deeper.

"Is everything alright at home?" he inquired with a note of concern in his voice. Alex didn't have time to answer before he was asking another question. "Do you live alone, Jack?"

"No, I live with my…" Alex trailed off, not knowing what to call Nigel.

He never had the need to refer to him as anything in particular until that moment. Helen and Imogen had seemed to create their own idea of what Nigel and Alex's relationship was and everyone else just assumed they were friends. *Very close friends, who lived together.* He wasn't sure of what Mr. Campbell would think of their relationship in

any case, he was old fashioned after all. So he decided to take a page out of Imogen's book.

"My partner" he finished, hoping the pause wouldn't be too obvious.

The man hummed in acknowledgement. "Are you having trouble with her?"

Alex shouldn't have been surprised at the use of *her* , people usually chose to believe what made them feel more comfortable.

"Something like that, sir," he said, turning to put the last remaining book in its place on the shelf.

He went to grab the book cart to put it away, but Mr Campbell stopped him. "That's alright, Jack, I can take care of it. You have done enough today," he said, smiling at Alex.

"Thank you sir, I'll see you on Monday, then." Alex nodded in his direction and went to take his leave.

Standing at the bottom of the stairs, he turned as he heard Mr. Campbell call his name.

"Jack!" The man called from where he stood on the first step. "If you allow me to give you some unsolicited advice, go take a walk, get some air, you won't solve anything while you're quite obviously still upset."

It was indeed, unsolicited advice, but Alex decided to listen to him

Instead of going back to the apartment immediately, he took the long way home. He walked around the colorful streets, had lunch at a small restaurant by the coast and sat on a bench to look at the sea. He was going to miss being so close to the shore, but he knew they couldn't stay there much longer.

He didn't let himself think about his argument with Nigel until he was on his way back to the apartment. It took a fair share of self-convincing inner monologues to decide that maybe he had been too hard on Nigel. Maybe for once he should have been the bigger person. He had to admit that, Nigel's words had gotten to him for all the wrong reasons. But he was sure that they could work it out. They always did.

When he got to their building, the sun was already starting to set and

the sky was a mixture of gold and magenta. He met Helen as she was going down the stairs, taking two steps at a time. She didn't say hi, as she would usually do, and instead she just gave him a disapproving look, like he had done something to insult her. He found it odd –he was sure that the rent had been paid on time, and if that weren't the case, surely she would have said something. He didn't give it much thought though. He could ask her later, when she didn't look to be in such a hurry.

Alex opened the door to the apartment and found that the lights in the living room were off. In fact, the entire apartment seemed to be in the dark, with only the dim light coming through the windows keeping him from stumbling on his feet.

"Nigel?" he called but received no answer.

He took his shoes off in the entry and turned on the lights. As the new brightness illuminated the room, he saw that the door to Nigel's studio was ajar.

He noticed something else as well:, there was blood on the floor.

Chapter End Notes

:) leave a comment don't be shy

Is this more than you bargained for yet?

Chapter Summary

Alex has to deal with Nigel's demons, along with some of his own.

Chapter Notes

This one is a bit angsty folks, so beware
Check the end notes to see some very important warnings. They include some minor spoilers for the chapter but if you are easily triggered I advice you to check them out.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It took a second for the sight to sink in, to send a message from his eyes to his brain. He was taking his jacket off when he finally processed the fact that there was *blood* , just a few drops, but enough to turn on the alarm in his head.

Alex dropped the jacket on the floor and ran the remaining steps to the studio, a million thoughts rushing through his mind within a fraction of a second.

He slammed the door open and found Nigel inside. He was standing in front of his desk, his back turned to Alex.

"Nigel!" He couldn't hide the urgency in his voice.

Nigel turned to him with a quick move, wide eyes looking at Alex like a deer caught in the headlights.

"Jack?"

Standing face to face as they were now, Alex noticed with horror that Nigel's hands were stained with blood and he was holding a scalpel in his right. There were some splatters of red on his shirt as well, the same one he had been wearing when Alex had left, almost seven hours ago. A quick survey of the room told him that the blood was most likely not Nigel's. On top of his desk was a dead raven, on its back and facing the ceiling with its wings spread wide. There were some black feathers scattered around the small room, on the floor and on the desk, along with more blood.

"Nigel, what is going on?" Alex asked tentatively.

Nigel looked around himself, like he was just noticing his surroundings for the first time. His eyes followed Alex's which had been frantically trying to make sense of the situation. His shoulders sagged as he looked at the bird.

"There was a raven outside. I left the door open accidentally and it got in," he said, not looking back at Alex. His voice was calm and distant.

"What happened? Why is it dead, Nigel?"

Why did you kill it? He thought but didn't say.

"It had been watching me for months now, jabbing at the glass on the windows and trying to get inside," he stated, like it was the most logical thing in the world, like that answered Alex's question.

"Nigel, what are you talking about?"

"Ravens are considered omens of death." Nigel turned to him and Alex's blood froze at his next words. "It was here for me."

The air in the room felt cold, probably colder than it should at that time of the year. Alex wasn't sure if he should blame the open window or the situation itself. It sure felt like what Nigel had just said could have the power to change the temperature in the room.

Alex shook his head. "There are ravens all over the town, I saw one at work today." Maybe it was useless trying to argue with Nigel's logic, but he wasn't going to stop trying.

"I shouldn't have left, I should've finished what I started." Nigel ignored him, his left hand twitching, slowly but repeatedly pulling at the hem of his t-shirt.

"Finish what, Nigel?"

"There are two months left to collect my Maraclea, I can still do it if I go back."

Alex felt an imminent urge to jump, grab Nigel by the shoulders, just do something. But he didn't move, he was frozen where he stood. "No, we are *not* going back, Nigel. That's all in the past, you don't have to do anything," he was pleading for him to be reasonable.

"You don't understand, Jack, I failed my purpose. I think…" he trailed off, his eyes unfocused, looking somewhere past Alex. "I think I was

meant to die that night."

"Shut up," Alex choked."You weren't supposed to do anything, the ravens aren't here for you, they're just birds. Listen to me, Nigel!" He was starting to raise his voice. He didn't want to make Nigel more upset when he was obviously in a delicate mental state, but he was getting desperate and there wasn't much he could do to stay calm when Nigel was talking about dying. "You're not supposed to die!"

"But maybe that's what I should do. You said that Susan wasn't your Maraclea. If you meant that, then it means I should die. I could be your Maraclea." His eyes lit up, like he'd had an epiphany. It made Alex sick to his stomach.

"That's not how any of this works, you're not making any sense," Alex said as he took a step towards Nigel.

"You don't understand, but you will," Nigel said with such conviction that it would have been reassuring in any other circumstance. To Alex's horror, Nigel looked down at the scalpel. It was one of the big ones with a long blade; he'd seen him using it on more than one animal and knew that it could cut efficiently through the skin.

"Nigel, you don't know what you're talking about." Alex took another step. With how small the room was, they were left standing less than a meter from each other. "Drop that!" he demanded, but it came out less intimidating and more like a plea. "Drop it, Nigel! Listen to me, you don't want to die!"

"And why do you care?" Nigel snapped, his face twisting in anger as he took a step away from Alex and pointed the scalpel at him. His left hand kept pulling at his shirt with more frantic, short movements, getting blood on the fabric. "You're just going to leave me anyway!"

Alex shook his head in disbelief. "I'm not leaving, I'm not going anywhere. Why would you think that?"

"Why wouldn't you?" Nigel's voice cracked. "Everyone does, no one stays, not unless they have a reason."

"What makes you think that I don't have a reason?"

"You used to have one, but not anymore. You don't believe it, we were supposed to be united, but you're just going to leave now."

Everything was wrong. Nigel was shaking, but the hand holding the

scalpel remained steady. Alex couldn't will himself to be afraid; he didn't back down, didn't raise his arms. He could hear his blood rushing in his ears and his heart rate increasing by the second.

He didn't know why Nigel was suddenly acting this way, didn't know what signs he had missed that had led them to this point, but he knew that it was in his hands to fix it. So he did the only thing he hadn't allowed himself to do until that moment, no matter how much it hurt his ego.

"I'm sorry," he choked out. "I'm sorry that I left you here when you were upset. I should've listened to you." The words left him one after the other, and he didn't let himself think too much about how hard it was to admit the blame. "I know that I fucked up, I know that I do that all the time." He swallowed, taking a moment to gather his confidence before he continued. "But I'm not going to leave, I promise."

Nigel's eyes were glistening with tears and he stuttered a few times before he managed to speak. "And why wouldn't you? What reason do you have to stay?"

"Fuck, Nigel," Alex breathed in. "I love you." The admission came out without his permission.

The first tears finally started flowing from Nigel's eyes, but instead of looking relieved, his shoulders tensed up even more, the twitching of his left hand grew more aggressive, and the scalpel began to tremble in his grasp. "That's a lie," he accused.

"What?"

"That's not how this works," Nigel continued. "That's *not* how any of this works."

"Nigel-" Alex tried to say.

"We are linked by fate, we are a part of something bigger than us," he interrupted. "I didn't ask you to love me, that would be a mistake. I only asked you to join me, so we could reach our true potential."

"Is that so? So you're going to tell me that you don't feel the same?"

Alex would have been impressed at himself for being so open, had he not been so preoccupied with the situation at the time. It had taken him months to come to terms with his own feelings, and he'd thought

that Nigel was the one of the two of them who had it all figured out. He was just then realizing that Nigel had only ever felt secure in their relationship because he was under the impression that it somehow answered to a bigger purpose.

"Don't you remember what I said that night? Didn't I tell you who you were to me?" Alex asked, but he had the sudden realization that he had not, in fact, told Nigel what he meant to him. He'd said that Susan wasn't his one, true love, but he'd never said that *Nigel* was, either. Alex had just assumed that Nigel kissing him had been the confirmation that he *knew* . Again, he had been wrong.

"I'm sorry," Alex said again. "I'm sorry that I didn't tell you, but the reason I'm here is because I want to be, because I can't leave you." His voice was starting to sound desperate to his own ears, and he could feel the tears welling up in his eyes. "You're fucked up, but I am too. I believe in you, I believe in everything you said, I do, that's why I left it all behind and I'd do it again. I'll do anything you want me to, Nigel!" Alex wanted to get closer to him more than anything else, but he was afraid that it would set Nigel off, so he stood there instead, looking straight into his teary eyes, the tip of the scalpel no more than ten centimeters from his own face.

"I'll change the world with you if that's what you want, we'll bring back the order, anything you think we should do," Alex assured him and he meant every word. "But that's not why I'm here., I'm here because I love you, and God forgive me, because you were right, that's the thing that I'm most afraid of, even after everything I've done, but I do love you and I don't want you to die."

Nigel shook his head and something behind his eyes shifted as the tears kept flowing. In an unexpected burst of desperate rage, he shouted, "You're lying!"

Alex saw his hold on the scalpel faltering and took the chance to grab Nigel's wrist. Nigel tried to dodge him, and in a swift but clumsy movement he slid the blade across the inside of Alex's right forearm, leaving a long line of red.

"Fuck!" Alex cursed, stumbling back against the open door, and covered the fresh wound with his left hand. It was shallow but it stung like most new wounds did. He only gave himself a second to regain his balance before he was surging against Nigel again. "Nigel, stop!"

"You can't say that!" Nigel was still shouting. "You can't look at me and

say you love me, that's not how it works!" He was standing back, waving the scalpel around as he spoke, putting some distance between them.

Alex rushed towards him, not giving him time to react, and managed to grab him by the waist with both arms and push him against the wall. The scalpel fell to the floor, and he kicked it away as he tried to immobilize Nigel by putting his thin arms over his head and holding them against the wall.

"And why is that? Why can't I just love you? Why is it so hard to understand?" He shouted even though he was so close to Nigel that he could feel his shaky breath against his own face.

Surprisingly, Nigel didn't struggle, didn't try to break free from Alex's hold. He just looked at him, his ears and eyes red, tear tracks visible on his cheeks as more fresh ones kept following.

A long moment passed in silence, the sound of their breathing the only disturbance in the room, along with Alex's heartbeat that he was sure only he could hear.

And then, "You can't love me," Nigel whispered. "Llove can't protect you, love can't keep you here. If your reason is love, then that means I can lose you," he said, his voice breaking, "and I can't lose you, Jack, I can't."

With that, everything else came tumbling down, tears fell from Alex's eyes as he looked at Nigel's broken expression. He felt anger, at the world mostly, but also at Nigel for having put up walls so tall around himself that Alex hadn't been able to see them. He was angry at himself, too, for not realizing that Nigel had been in so much pain for so long, for thinking that he could fix everything with a kiss and no words.

He let go of Nigel's arms, letting them fall against his sides, but Nigel's left hand kept twitching uncontrollably and Alex could see his shoulders shaking and at that moment he felt with an overwhelming certainty that Nigel was slipping away from him. He pulled Nigel into his arms;, his body felt heavier than it ever had, as the boy just let himself fall against Alex's chest. Alex brought him down to the floor and leaned back against the wall with him.

Nigel was a dead weight in his arms, with his head resting on Alex's shoulder and his arms loosely crossed over his middle in between their bodies. Alex held on to him, pressing Nigel against his body, making

sure that he couldn't go anywhere. It didn't matter that he looked like all the fight had been drained out of him, Alex still felt as if Nigel were two breaths away from disappearing forever.

"I'm not going anywhere," he said after a while, a quiet sigh escaping his lips. "You don't have to die to-" he cut off, choked by his own emotions, the tears on his face and in his throat making it hard to speak. "You don't have to die to keep me, I want you to live."

He felt Nigel's body trembling, and Alex tightened his hold on him.

"Are you listening to me, Nigel?" he asked, but didn't wait for a response. "If destiny wants us together, then that's what we're going to be, and God will have to drag my dead body away from you if he doesn't like it."

Nigel let out a devastating sob. He tensed and Alex feared for a second that he had said the wrong thing, but Nigel's arms came around his back and then they were both holding each other.

"Jack," he cried, so quietly that Alex could only hear it because he'd said it right in his ear. He sounded so *small* , so broken and desperate.

"I'm here," Alex choked out.

Nigel continued to weep for a few minutes, letting out tiny, miserable sobs one after the other. Alex looked around them, over Nigel's shoulder. The room was a mess, the scalpel was a few meters away, having been knocked outside of the room. Outside, the sun had already set and the only reason he could still *see* at all was that he had turned on the lights in the living room. He looked down at himself then, his legs sprawled out in front of him and the cut on his forearm bleeding, some drops lazily falling from the opened flesh and staining the back of Nigel's –actually Alex's– shirt.

Alex held Nigel as the boy cried and shook uncontrollably, not knowing if he was trying to keep him safe from the world, God, or himself and he wondered, not for the first time: how had any of this happened, how did it get so bad?

Alex entered the bathroom, took his shirt off, and threw it on the floor. He washed his hands that were now stained with drying blood, both his and the dead raven's. He'd left Nigel in their bed after struggling –but finally managing– to get him out of the studio and changed into a clean t-shirt, and then cleaned his hands with tissues

and hand sanitizer. He knew he had to get him to take a shower, but he still looked pretty out of it, so that would have to wait.

Alex watched the water in the sink turn a dark pink and then finally red when he tried to clean the wound on his arm. He hissed from the pain and allowed himself to have a brief moment of panic as he realized that Nigel had cut him with the same scalpel he'd used to stab the bird. He finished cleaning the wound, dried it off, and applied some antiseptic Nigel kept around. He covered it with a small bandage –also Nigel's– and hoped that it was enough to keep him out of trouble for the time being. He had enough on his plate as it was.

The events of the past hour were replaying in his head, as he tried to make sense of what had just happened. Nigel wasn't alright, he'd known that from the start, but at some point he had accepted that was just how Nigel was and it was no use trying to figure him out. But the way he was acting, killing a bird because he thought that it was some sort of death omen, the tremors running through his body, the things he had said about dying. It was heartbreaking and extremely concerning. Nigel had never hurt Alex before, not like that. That was also something to worry about. Alex wasn't afraid of him, he was afraid *for* him.

Looking up in the mirror, gripping the sink with his own trembling hands, he asked himself if he was strong enough to deal with the situation, if he had what it took to help Nigel, to move on, no matter what sacrifices he might have to make. He hoped that the answer was *yes* .

The sound of someone knocking on the door was unexpected, and he was in no condition to see anyone, so he stood still, waiting for whoever was outside to get tired and just go.

"Jack? Nigel? Are you boys there?" Imogen's voice called from outside.

Alex sighed and covered his eyes with his hands. He stood there in the bathroom going over his options. He could ignore Imogen, even though she sounded worried and would probably just open the door with her own key if she thought that something was wrong or if she needed something– or he could put on a clean t-shirt and open the door for her, making sure that she wouldn't wake Nigel up.

He finally decided on the second.

On the other side of the door, Imogen looked as distressed as her voice

had sounded.

"Jack? Oh, I'm so glad that you're alright," she sighed in relief, with a hand over her chest.

Alex thought that he wouldn't use the word *alright* to describe how he was at that moment, but he kept that to himself.

"Is something the matter?" he asked her.

"That's what I wanted to ask you, actually." She was discretely trying to look inside but Alex had the door only open enough for his thin body and he was taller than her, so she couldn't look over his shoulder. "Is Nigel in there?"

The question caught him off guard. Had Nigel said something? Had Imogen heard them earlier?

"He's sleeping," he said. "Why?"

"Oh," she sighed once again, even more relieved this time around. "That's good, me and Helen were really worried about him. You see, Helen says that she'd seen him on the balcony earlier today…" she trailed off and glanced around before setting her eyes back on Alex's. "She thought that it looked like he wanted to…" she looked at Alex expectantly, hoping that he would finish what she was saying. At his silence she continued, "To jump."

His heart stopped for a second at her admission.

"Helen has some experience with that type of thing, she's been through a lot," Imogen said, looking uncomfortable all of a sudden. It occurred to Alex that perhaps that wasn't something that she was supposed to divulge. "The thing is, she came by to talk to him and she says that Nigel told her some very upsetting things."

She can get in line , he thought. Nigel wasn't one to talk a lot, and when he did it usually wasn't to say the most normal things, but that day he'd exceeded himself. No wonder Imogen looked so concerned, and Helen, too. That's why she'd looked at Alex like that when they'd crossed paths earlier, she probably thought that it was all his fault. Maybe it was.

"So when she told me that, you know, I *had* to come check on you both."

"I'm sorry, Imogen, I appreciate your concern, but he's fine now." That was a lie, but he wasn't dead, at least. Alex didn't know when he'd set the bar so low.

Imogen looked uncertain, fidgeting with her keyring. She had been pointedly looking at Alex's arm, where he'd covered the cut from the scalpel. "Alright," she settled. "If you say so, Jack."

"I do," he assured her.

She turned around to leave and Alex was about to close the door when she turned back to him. "But if you need anything, and I mean *anything,* you know you can ask. It doesn't have to be me, of course, but just..." she shrugged "ask for help, if you need it."

He nodded and she seemed pleased, or at least temporarily satisfied, so she finally walked away.

Going back inside Alex looked around the living room. He would have to clean the floor in front of Nigel's studio, the desk, probably the walls as well, and he would have to do something about the bird. But for the moment, he was going to make tea.

Camomile was supposed to help with sleep and relaxation, so that's what he chose to make. He stood there in the kitchen, just staring at the pot, his mind blank, simply waiting for the minutes to go by. When Alex went to grab the honey his right hand failed him and the bottle fell on the floor, some of the honey spilling out. He cursed and lifted the bottle and put it back on the counter, watching as the golden liquid spread on the kitchen floor, another mess he would have to clean.

Like the blood, it wasn't too much and the bottle was plastic, so nothing had been broken. Then why did it make him so sad? Before he could do anything about it, tears started rushing from his eyes, again. Maybe it was the fact that the honey had been for Nigel, or just another thing piling up on his to-do list, he didn't know, but an overwhelming feeling of failure and despair fell over him. He cried in silence for a few minutes and then sobered up, deciding that was enough emotion for one day. He cleaned the floor and finished preparing the tea.

Nigel was lying on their bed, face down under the cover with only his head visible. To anyone else, he might've looked asleep, but Alex could tell that he was awake. He placed Nigel's mug next to him on the nightstand and sat beside him on the bed, just looking out the

window and taking sips from his own tea.

Nigel didn't move for some time, so Alex sat there listening to his steady breathing without saying anything, because what was there to say that he hadn't said already?

Eventually Nigel shifted, turning on his side. He looked exhausted; he brought his hands from under the covers to grip the seams of the pillowcase under his head. He was staring right ahead, not out the window but seemingly straight at the wall under it. His gaze was distant, but not as unfocused as it had been before. Alex counted that as a win.

Not knowing what else to do, Alex moved to stand up but stopped as he felt Nigel's hand grab his wrist. When he turned, Nigel was looking at him with a neutral expression, but his eyes were shining and pleading.

"I'm not leaving, I just have to clean up some things," he murmured, trying to be reassuring.

"Okay," Nigel said, his voice rough from crying and screaming.

Alex nodded at him and waited until he let go of his arm to stand up.

"Don't throw out the raven," Nigel murmured.

"What?"

"I want to keep it."

Alex shook his head, mouth agape. "That's disgusting," he couldn't help saying, but he froze the second the words left his mouth.

"But you said you would do anything for me," Nigel said and looked at Alex with a dead serious expression.

He had screwed up again, he was sure. Not even two hours had gone by and he had already fucked up.

But then Nigel laughed. A quiet, tired, but *real* laugh. Stunned, Alex started laughing too. He laughed along with Nigel until there were tears in both of their eyes and for once they weren't caused by pain.

Alex breathed in and he leaned over to kiss Nigel's forehead. He lingered there, with his lips pressed to the boy's skin for a long moment, raising his free hand to softly run his fingers through his

hair.

"You'll be alright," he whispered, trying to reassure himself as much as Nigel. "It'll all be alright."

Nigel let out a deep breath but didn't say anything in return.

"Drink your tea, before it gets cold," Alex told him, straightening up again and starting to walk towards the door. Nigel hummed in agreement and Alex heard the ruffling of sheets as he left the room. The door stayed open behind him.

He had to look up how to preserve the dead body of a raven, because he wasn't letting Nigel anywhere near a scalpel for a while.

Chapter End Notes

> CW: Non graphic descriptions of blood and minor injury, death of an animal, suicidal ideation and mentions of death.

Nigel

Chapter Summary

An insight on Nigel's thoughts... As well as a little hope for the future

Chapter Notes

Hello! Back with another chapter.
This one's a bit different since it's from Nigel's POV instead of Alex's. I had a lot of fun writing this one and hopefully you will enjoy it just as much.

CW: implied suicide ideations, implied childhood trauma, unhealthy coping mechanisms, mental health issues

Read the end notes for some clarifications

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It would be hard to explain when it all began for Nigel.

He supposes he had been what people call a normal child, at some point. But he's never been able to remember a time of his life when he felt remotely *normal* .

From a very young age he knew that the way he experienced the world was not the same as his peers. When the other children were hurt, they cried, twisted their faces in pain whenever they bled. But not Nigel. It was not that he didn't *feel* the pain, he simply could not react to it.

So whenever something would harm him enough to cause a visible wound, whether an unfortunate fall, the scratch of a cat's paw, or a simple paper cut, he would not say anything, would not scream or cry or show any sign of discomfort. He couldn't, didn't know how.

It made his father uncomfortable, as most things related to Nigel did.

Maybe the biggest mistake he made was not trying to pretend.

He knew how humans worked, he was nothing if not observant, and he'd learned very quickly what was considered normal and what about him didn't fit the norm. But he couldn't care enough to pretend, he

never did and he never tried. Pretending wasn't something Nigel liked to do; he preferred honesty, things you could not fake. Like death.

That was another thing Nigel wasn't sure of when he'd started to like. Perhaps it had been the first funeral he'd attended at the early age of five years old. An open casket and a dead relative inside, one that he didn't know. So many people cried that day, and so many of them were dishonest about their grief. But the dead body in the room couldn't lie, couldn't pretend. Death was maybe the first truly honest thing Nigel knew in his life.

But he couldn't be sure that he hadn't always been fascinated by death. There was plenty that Nigel didn't remember about his childhood, so many weeks and months were hidden behind black, lost pieces of time. He was curious about the missing memories, but he'd learned not to push too much. He feared that lifting the black veil would bring nothing but pain and discomfort. Emotions were a dangerous thing; *that* he knew. For every physical hurt that Nigel couldn't fully experience, there was a very different, more abstract kind of ache that would turn his mind to shreds, leaving him incapable of protecting himself from the pain. He'd learned how to hide from those as well, the black veil was proof enough of that.

He'd gotten used to going through life, avoiding the pain in his heart and in his mind and being punished for not pretending.

Meeting his Jack had been a blessing. A part of him that he didn't know was missing, finally found. Jack was brave and reckless and so, so beautiful. He experienced emotions so loudly, his anger was an incredible force that had drawn Nigel in the second they'd met. Nigel wasn't one to talk much, he didn't like what came out of most human interactions, but Jack made him want to get close, talk to him, show him his most closely kept secrets, the ones he'd hidden from everyone else. Finding Jack would have been overwhelming–and for a second it was–had he not been sure of their destiny.

There was nothing to fear when he knew that he and Jack were meant to be united, meant to fulfill a long lost prophecy, a task given to them by their ancestors. It all made sense then: why Nigel had felt like an outsider, a different species, in every context he'd been in. He was simply not made to be a part of the regular lives of men and women; all his life he had been dormant, waiting to find his partner in fate. With Jack by his side he could release his true self, he could go all in without fear of being hurt, for Jack would never hurt him.

At some point though, he hadn't been so sure. Things had twisted, Jack, –no, Alex?– had rejected their purpose, he had looked at Nigel with fear and disgust. Nigel had felt cold, but he couldn't shiver, he did not know how. He remembered how it was to feel rejected, and some of the black veil had lifted, and he'd seen pieces of his past that were supposed to be hidden from him–he was not supposed to look, it hurt too much.

Nigel had found the solution then.

He didn't like to lie, but it seemed like he had been lying to himself and he could not stand that. Alex, Jack, had thought that Nigel intended to kill him, but there had never been the need for that. Nigel had been the one that was supposed to die all along. Because was there anything more honest, more real than dying? Nigel realized that the only thing he could do to make sure that their destiny would be fulfilled was to die.

But then Alex had said that there was another option, that they could do something else, and Nigel had believed him. He'd kissed Alex because he thought that was what Alex wanted, and he had been surprised to realize that it was something that he wanted himself, as well.

For a while then, following Alex had been enough. He was mean sometimes but that was something that Nigel had always loved about him, so much so that he sometimes would say the wrong thing just to make him angry, just to see a little of that honest emotion.

But it didn't last long. For weeks Nigel felt out of place in a way that he hadn't in a long time. He didn't know how to live without a purpose. He was drifting, and he was losing time again, brand new pieces of information disappearing under black, empty spaces in his memories, some old ones trying to come back. He tried to bring back the old threats, if only to make Alex, –his name was Jack– wake up. But nothing worked, and then Nigel couldn't find comfort in following him anymore; he needed fate, he needed something else. Human touch had never brought him anything but pain. His body didn't fear the hurt, and he had come to love the blood that poured out of his own skin, but Jack wasn't hurting him like that now. Not even his anger felt comforting to Nigel anymore, not when his own emotions were trying to come through, breaking the surface and making him double over in agony.

No, his Jack wasn't being honest. That was the only answer.

Suddenly Nigel couldn't get up from bed so easily. He would spend the entire day without eating, because what was the purpose of being alive when he no longer had a destiny to fulfill?

If only Jack could understand, if only he had been honest. But Jack couldn't see it, and Nigel couldn't tell him.

That morning Jack had left him in the living room, and Nigel stood there for god only knows how long. He lost some time then as well, and when he finally came to, his legs hurt from standing up and there was an ache in his stomach that might've been hunger, though he was never sure how any of that felt. He doesn't remember much of what happened, but he knows that he walked to the balcony. He'd looked down and wondered if it would hurt to fall from the third floor, or would the numbness remain, would it all just fade to black, never to wake up again.

There was a sound then, something coming from inside the apartment, but he couldn't move. The sound kept repeating and then another one joined. Nigel thought it was a voice, but he wasn't paying that much attention. He heard his name and he turned.

"Nigel, are you alright?" It was Helen, and she was standing right behind him. He didn't know how that happened.

At some point he ended up sitting on the couch, and Helen was silently doing something in the kitchen. He couldn't do anything but stare at his own hands.

"Is Jack coming home?" she asked him.

He didn't know the answer to that, so he didn't respond.

She started talking then, nonsensical, irrelevant things about her day. Or maybe they had seemed irrelevant because Nigel couldn't see any importance in anything at that point. She gave him something to eat, he didn't know what it was, just that it soothed the ache in his stomach. How had she known that he was hungry? Another thing he didn't know.

"Helen," he said without realizing.

"Yes, love?"

"My mother's name was Helen."

There was a long pause after that where everything was silent. But then his mind started functioning, a million thoughts coming all at once.

"She's dead now," he said, and his hands started shaking.

It was the pain again, the one that came from inside, from somewhere he couldn't place.

"I'm sorry," Helen said to him. Nigel didn't know why she apologized, it wasn't her fault. It was only Nigel's.

His mother was dead, just like he'd planned for her to be, because she was important and she had been real and he'd wanted to give her a purpose.

"I think…" he started to say, but his mouth was having trouble getting the words out, "that I should have died too."

He thinks she said something after that, but he doesn't remember. He said something as well, many things probably, too much, but not enough at the same time. None of that mattered anymore. Eventually the shaking stopped and Helen mistook his calmness for wellness and she left. It was better off that way.

He sat on the couch for much longer and then another sound startled him. When he turned to his side, there was a bird, black and tall and looking straight at Nigel.

A raven, he was sure.

He knew this raven, he'd seen it before.

Fear made his throat dry, his heart hammered inside his chest. It was here for him, God had finally come to punish him for not completing his task. What if it went for Jack next? Nigel couldn't allow it.

In that thought he found the strength to stand up and mindlessly run to his studio to get a scalpel. After that it had all been a blur, there was blood, but not his and then the bird was dead.

He had a sudden sense of clarity in that moment, looking down at its lifeless eyes. Nigel had taken so much in the name of fate, and he wasn't giving anything back. Jack would eventually have to pay the price as well, for Nigel's mistakes.

Nigel couldn't stand the hurt anymore, it was overwhelming. Something was breaking behind the walls in his mind.

But he knew how to stop it.

Then Jack appeared behind him and everything turned a little more confusing for a while.

There had been so much pain, it was unbearable. Every word Jack said shattered every single one of his protections, and Nigel's hands wouldn't stop shaking with the hurt of it. Eventually it had all cleared out, the pain had been a little less everywhere, and Nigel was finally able to breathe.

Nigel could hear Alex roaming around the apartment, cleaning up. He spoke with someone as well and then he came back to Nigel with some tea.

"You'll be alright," Alex said, and Nigel chose to believe him.

The first night was quiet. He slept until noon and then Alex made him take a shower. His mind was hazy, no complicated thoughts coming through. After that everything started to become clearer, until he could do things for himself again, without needing Alex to remind him of them first.

"Don't you have work?" he asked him on Monday morning.

They were in the kitchen, Alex attempting to make them some breakfast, Nigel sitting in front of the counter with his hands around his mug. Camomile again.

Alex didn't turn from where he was spreading butter on a piece of toast as he answered. "I asked for a couple of days off."

"I don't need you to be here all the time," Nigel countered.

Alex turned and placed two plates in front of Nigel. Toast with butter for himself and honey over Nigel's.

"Don't worry about that now," Alex told him, and that was the end of that conversation.

They ate in silence for a while and then Alex spoke again.

"I was thinking."

"Oh no, are you sure that's a good idea?" Nigel teased.

Alex rolled his eyes at him before continuing. "I was *thinking* that we could find something you want to do." Nigel noticed that he had stopped trying to eat, he was fidgeting with his arms in front of him and he wasn't looking at Nigel as he spoke. "Anywhere you want to go, I'll take you there." Alex didn't sound unsure, Nigel could tell that he meant what he was saying, but the conversation was obviously making him uncomfortable, even when he'd been the one to start it. "If there's anything you think we should be doing, just tell me, okay?" he finished, looking up at Nigel.

It was endearing, how Alex was trying so hard to be nice, when it was something that didn't come naturally for him. Nigel watched him for a second, the wide green eyes with small spots of brown around the iris, looking back at him expectantly. His eyes wandered over the freckles scattered all over his face and his pale arms, uncovered and fully visible in his short sleeved red t-shirt. His hair was still slightly damp from his morning shower. He was so pretty, although Nigel knew that Alex wouldn't appreciate being called that.

Nigel realized that he wanted to kiss him, not because he thought that was what Alex wanted–although he didn't doubt that was also the case–but because he genuinely felt the urge to lean in and touch Alex's lips with his own. It was a scary thought to have. Alex had assured him that he was Nigel's, that he loved him no matter what, but every time he considered those words and what they meant, Nigel could feel a tremor starting in his left hand. He shook those fears away and tried to focus on the present. Alex was there and he was being oh so charming, so willing to please Nigel.

"Why are you smiling like that?" Alex asked him, with a puzzled frown.

"Alex, my knight in shining armor," he said, widening his eyes in feigned awe before bursting into laughter.

"Fuck off!" Alex cursed, and Nigel couldn't do anything but laugh even harder.

He could see a little reluctant smile making its way to Alex's face as well.

They finished their breakfast and an hour later Helen came by to check on them.

"Helen," Alex said as a greeting.

"Jack," she deadpanned.

They were glaring at each other, standing in the living room, while Nigel watched from where he was leaning against the doorframe to the bedroom.

He wasn't sure how to behave in front of her. She had been present in a very vulnerable and confusing time for Nigel. He didn't remember if he'd told her anything that could put them in danger, or that could turn into a bigger issue over time. He hoped that wasn't the case, at least she only seemed to be mad at Alex at the moment and that was always amusing to see. Nigel hadn't thought much of Helen and Imogen when he'd first met them, they were just people, nothing he should pay attention to. But he had to admit that Helen in particular was at least interesting. She always wore leather jackets and she had a very loud motorcycle; Nigel could always tell when she had left the building and when she'd come back. But most importantly, Alex had seemed to grow a certain sense of kinship towards her. Maybe because she was rebellious, always spoke her mind, and she was also a little mean when she wanted to be. Seeing them at odds because of *Nigel* was particularly amusing.

"Nigel, sweetheart, how are you feeling?"

Now *that* he didn't enjoy so much.

"I'm fine, Helen," he simply said.

Helen nodded his way. "Alright," she said, but didn't look like she believed him. "Imogen wanted me to bring you some things." She offered a small package to Alex, who took it reluctantly, still glaring at the woman.

Nigel didn't have any previous experience with the subject, but he was sure that landlords weren't supposed to treat you like you were their family. He found it odd that two people would be so *nice* with them, just because, or well, perhaps it was that they saw themselves in Alex and Nigel. Maybe that had softened their hearts somehow.

Helen left and Alex went to look through the gifts. There wasn't much, some baked goods, most likely home-made, a small, red notebook, a travel magazine and a newspaper. Alex had told her that they would be leaving soon, a couple of months from then at most. Apparently this was her way of saying goodbye while helping them to plan for

their future.

Nigel examined the notebook, it looked old but well cared for. The pages were blank and soft to the touch.

"They haven't found them, " Alex said, placing the newspaper in front of Nigel on the coffee table. Nigel looked at where he was pointing, an article about them. It took a small section of the page and it didn't have a picture attached. It could easily go unnoticed, but he knew that Alex went through every news article he found, obsessively searching for any sign that the authorities were on their trail.

He read the article and noticed what Alex had meant. The police hadn't found his parents' remains yet, In fact, they had only begun to search for them a month ago. Alex had been reported missing by his father, and later on Nigel had been added to the search when he didn't show up for school. Detective McKenzie was at the head of the investigation. He had declared that the police were considering a possible connection between the disappearances of the four of them, but they didn't have any concrete theories, or at least none they could state publicly. The article didn't mention anything about Susan's death, but both of them already knew that Alex had been the main suspect for a solid three months until the police had started looking for other possibilities when they couldn't find any evidence of Alex's culpability.

Alex walked away towards the bedroom without another word, and Nigel folded the newspaper and put it aside. He looked at the travel magazine, the front cover had a picture of the National Museum of El Prado in Madrid. He didn't pick it up, instead he went after Alex and found him making the bed as he did every day, even when there was no one to tell him to do it. Nigel knew that it was a learned habit, part of the strict routine that his father had instilled in him. He also knew that Alex had been making a conscious effort to wait until noon to do it, unsure if Nigel would be going back to bed to sleep the day away.

"About what you asked earlier," Nigel began, "do you mean it?"

Alex turned, leaving his task on hold. From this angle Nigel could see the red line on his forearm, healed enough so that he didn't have to wear a bandage anymore. It wouldn't leave a scar, the scalpel hadn't gone deep enough for that, but Nigel would remember it for as long as he lived.

"Of course," Alex said. "You know I do, Nigel."

Nigel took a couple steps forward until he was standing right in front of him. Alex was looking at him intently, and his eyes fixing on Nigel's lips brought back the urge to kiss him.

"Do you know what you want to do already?" Alex asked him, like he would truly accept anything Nigel would ask of him.

It was ironic, how Nigel had been so willing to die for them, when dying was the only thing that Alex wouldn't let him do. It was a saying that dying for love was easy; the real challenge, according to some, was to live for love instead.

"I do," Nigel whispered.

Blue eyes stared at green for a minute, and Nigel watched as Alex gave in, leaning in to kiss him.

It felt like coming back to life, or being reborn, Nigel thought. To be so broken, so used to the numbness, only to be brought back by a kiss, the warm touch of another's lips. *Alex's* lips. He was gentle and tender, cautious even, not like he would usually kiss Nigel. But then again, Nigel had never needed tenderness as much as he did at that moment.

He cradled Alex's face in his hands, caressing the soft skin all the way to the back of his neck. In response, Alex's arms came around Nigel's waist, bringing him even closer.

Reluctantly, Nigel broke the kiss, slowly leaning his head back to look at Alex with a smile, and he asked, "How do you feel about Spain?"

Chapter End Notes

For a better understanding of this story you might want to know that I'm writing Nigel as someone with a Schizoid Personality Disorder. This is simply one of the many readings I did on the movie and just one possible interpretation. You may read this with anything else in mind but I thought you might want to know where I am coming from. You can learn more about this personal headcanon of mine on Diagnosing Nigel Colbie part 1 and Diagnosing Nigel Colbie part 2 on Tumblr.

Thank you all for your comments and your kudos and all the love you've been giving this story! It's what's keeping it alive.
With this chapter I'll be ending the first part of this story and the

next one will be set a year later. I considered making it into a series but I'd figured that might unnecessarily complicate things. Thank you again for reading and joining me in this journey! See ya next time...

In 2008 I woke up late in Spain

Chapter Notes

This is where the "no plot, just vibes" really begins.

CW: Homophobia

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Part II

August 3, 2008

The first thing Alex noticed on waking was the overwhelming heat in the room. It didn't exactly come as a surprise, it was the middle of the summer and the AC had been out of commission for the better part of the week, so they only had a couple of electric fans to rely on. The heat in Spain was dry and cruel. So much so that actual blood had come out of Alex's nose the first week of July and they had just experienced the worst heat wave of their lives. Alex ran hot naturally, so he had come to expect the fever-like sensation that greeted him every morning. However, he could tell that this time around, it wasn't just the weather to blame for the suffocating heat, as he felt a pressing weight on his chest.

A smile spread across his lips, and without opening his eyes, he brought his arms around the slim body lying on top of his. Nigel's head was resting against his chest, his breath slowly warming Alex's bare skin. He ran the tips of his fingers over Nigel's naked back, softly caressing the skin over his spine from his lower back all the way to his shoulder blades. A deep, annoyed sigh let him know that Nigel was awake as well.

"Why is it so hot?" Nigel said, his voice hoarse and husky from sleep.

That startled a laugh out of Alex. "It's summer and you broke the air-con by having it on all the time, remember?" he said, deciding to leave out the fact that they wouldn't be having this current problem had Nigel stayed on his side of the bed.

He only groaned in response.

"What time is it?" Alex asked him.

After shifting a little to look at the clock, he replied, "1:00 PM."

"Almost time for breakfast, then," Alex joked, and Nigel huffed against his chest.

Between his late shifts and his tendency to not set an alarm to wake them in the morning, his sleeping schedule had effectively gone to shit and Nigel's right along with it.

He felt him squirming in his hold and for a moment thought that he was going to get up, but a second later the light touch of soft lips met his neck. He took a deep breath, the insufferable heat suddenly forgotten as Nigel's hands trailed over his torso, making their way across his ribs and caressing the tender skin of his collarbones.

Alex felt a shiver run down his spine.

They had become accustomed to sleeping naked since the first weeks of June, when the days began to last longer as the sun refused to go down. It turned out to be very convenient, and not just to avoid the high temperatures during the night. Now, only occasionally would they go to bed wearing any piece of clothing at all. The restriction of fabrics was mostly reserved for the nights Alex would get home late after his shift at the bar, too tired to fully strip down or take a shower before collapsing face down on the bed. That had been the case the night before, and so he had fallen asleep with his slacks on, a choice he was already regretting for more than one reason.

He lowered his right hand to Nigel's thigh and discovered that he was wearing pajama pants, for who knows what reason, perhaps as an act of solidarity. Nigel seemed to take the touch as an invitation, and he started softly biting the already tender skin at the base of Alex's neck. He couldn't help the startled gasp that left his mouth at the sensation of Nigel's soft lips, warm breath, and the sting of his teeth on him. He tightened his grip on Nigel's thigh and his left hand moved to cradle the back of his head.

"Good morning," Nigel said, his raspy voice muffled against Alex's neck.

Alex barely suppressed the urge to laugh in response. It was a very good morning indeed. He opened his eyes, the light of the day making

him blink a couple times before his sight was clear. He was about to reply when he noticed a pair of eyes looking at him from the other side of the room.

"Nigel," he murmured, half amused and half annoyed. "Your bird is watching."

Nigel made a questioning sound and looked up without fully raising his head. Alex nodded in the direction of the wall in front of the bed where, on an almost empty shelf sat a stuffed raven, its brown glass eyes staring right back at him.

The bird had traveled all the way from Scotland to Spain with them, as had the rest of Nigel's beloved "pets". It had been in their freezer for almost an entire month before it had been taken care of. Alex found it extremely unnerving. It always seemed to be looking at you, no matter where you went, and it served as a constant reminder of something that he'd rather not think about.

Nigel finally lifted himself from on top of him and turned his head slightly to look at the raven. As expected, the situation only made him laugh, and he looked back at Alex with a mocking, lopsided grin on his face.

"What? You're worried he might tell someone what he saw?"

He . The bird was indeed a him, although only Nigel referred to it as such. They had learned a couple of weeks before leaving Scotland that the sudden increase of ravens at the island had been caused by a man who had been breeding them for god knows what purposes. Apparently, they had managed to escape from him and started reproducing in the wild. That explained why the raven looked so cared for and it was probably the reason why Alex hadn't gotten any weird illness after getting its blood on an open wound.

"I don't know," he answered, still looking past Nigel's shoulder and straight into the bird's eyes. "Maybe it *really* is a messenger." He was forced to look away from it as he felt the touch of Nigel's hands over his collarbones, caressing the skin over his Adam's apple and coming to cup his face.

"All the more reason to let it watch," Nigel said, leaning back and straightening to sit on top of Alex, effectively straddling him. The white sheet that had been covering them –because neither one could stand sleeping without one, no matter how hot it was– fell around Nigel's waist from the sudden change in position. "It's too late now to

worry about what he's seen." As he said it, he teased the fresh bite mark on Alex's neck with his fingertips, pressing lightly. The dull ache this caused on the bruised skin had Alex struggling to repress a whimper that almost made its way out of his throat. He watched enthralled, lips parted and wide-eyed as Nigel looked down at him with a teasing smile.

Alex had to agree with him, even if he didn't say it.

"It creeps me out," he retorted instead. "I told you not to bring it inside the bedroom."

"It didn't seem to bother you the other night," Nigel argued and shifted to the right, blocking Alex's view of the raven. The friction caused by the movement increased Alex's regret about not fully removing his clothes the previous night.

"It was dark, I couldn't see," he murmured in a futile attempt to continue the bickering, but Nigel was already leaning in to kiss the arc of his cheek, right under his left eye and he could feel him tugging the zipper of his slacks.

"Then close your eyes," Nigel whispered in his ear, and even someone as stubborn as Alex could admit defeat.

August 10, 2008

Alex hadn't been to a church in a while, not since before he'd left England. The churches in Spain were magnificent, standing tall and intimidating from the outside as he passed by them, not daring to go in for fear he might be rejected. Almost every week, Alex would stand in front of the one nearest to their apartment, watching people leave from Sunday mass and wondering if he would be allowed in, were he to ask.

In less than two years he had done so much, had said so many things and even if he hadn't, his thoughts alone were proof enough of so many sins. More often than not, Alex felt like he was being watched. It was a constant in his life, ever since he was a boy and he was taught about God's omnipresence. He'd never been afraid of it, although some people would've wanted him to be. It would've made him easier to tame and to guide as they liked, but Alex never gave them the satisfaction of controlling him.

When he was a child and he couldn't properly understand the words

being told to him, he thought of God as he thought of his father. That had pleased everyone around him when he had given it voice. We are all the children of God, after all, and Alex's simple conclusion had been accepted as the desired one for him to arrive at. But as he grew older, the comparison took on a more literal meaning. His father's presence felt as constant as the watchful eyes of God, wherever he went.

More than once he read about Lucifer, how his pride had led him to rebel against God and his plan, and he'd wondered what it would feel like to do such a thing. To be so great, so perfect, only to be cast down from heaven for your self perceived superiority. Lucifer rebelled against God's great plan, but hadn't that been part of His plan as well?

Looking at the white stone walls, meticulously carved faces looking back at him, Alex wondered still, how bad could it possibly be to disappoint one's father, to go against their every wish, when in doing so, you would be fulfilling your one true purpose.

"This is pointless," Nigel grunted next to him, as he looked inside the fountain in front of them. The bottom was visibly filled with coins, reflecting the sunlight through the clear water. People came to the square every day to throw coins into the fountain and ask for luck or a particular wish, expecting a miracle. There wasn't any story behind the fountain that could explain why people thought it had the power to grant them their wishes. It was just one of those things that someone started doing one day and then everyone else followed for years on end.

Nigel let a Euro fall into the water with a splash, in spite of his complaint.

"You can't just toss it like that," Alex argued. "You have to concentrate about what you want and *then* throw it in, or it won't work."

"I know how it works."

"Then why didn't you do it?"

Nigel screwed up his face in a scowl, looking into the water like the fountain had personally insulted him.

"Just throw in another," Alex prompted him, searching inside his pockets.

"And waste more money?"

"It's just a Euro." When his hands came up empty, he looked inside his wallet but couldn't find anything he could use there either. "Do you have some change?"

Nigel shook his head, looking at him quizzically.

Alex looked around the square in search of a solution. There were children running around, some people sitting on benches feeding the pigeons and just a couple of meters away from the fountain, he spotted a flower vendor. The man was holding a poorly done bouquet of yellow lilies in his hand and next to him there was a cart with a wide variety of flowers.

"I'll be right back," he told Nigel, already walking the small distance to talk to the vendor.

"Buenos días," he greeted and pulled a ten Euro bill out of his wallet and showed it to the man "¿Tiene cambio?"

The vendor looked up at Alex's face first, examining him with a frown, before he accepted the bill from him. He seemed to consider his answer for a second and then he shook his head and smiled at Alex.

"No creo, pero si me compras eso puede cambiar"

The guy was messing with him, that much was clear, if the way he was looking Alex's body up and down like he wanted to eat him was any indication. And now he was actually going to make him buy a flower, just to get some change. He glared at the man, who must've been in his mid twenties, shorter than Alex, but most people were these days. He had long dark hair held in a low ponytail and if he looked closely Alex thought he could see he was wearing eyeliner.

He looked at the flowers in the cart and sighed in resignation. "Una rosa" he said, pointing at a basket of red roses.

The man smiled even wider at that and Alex rolled his eyes, turning to look at where he'd left Nigel. He'd sat on the edge of the fountain, still looking inside. The light morning breeze had disheveled hair that was getting considerably longer, a few dark locks covering his eyebrows and softly falling over his lashes.

"Para el novio"

Alex turned his attention back to the man, who was handing him over a big red rose with a long stem. He took it and extended his free hand

to get the change.

"I'm sorry, what?" he asked, already blushing both from having switched back to English without meaning to and having understood what the vendor had said.

"Sorry," he said, his eyes widening slightly. "¿él no es tu novio? Your boyfriend?" He gestured in Nigel's direction and Alex turned to look over his shoulder, even though he knew exactly who the man was talking about.

He pondered the question for a second, putting the coins away inside his pocket. He hadn't introduced Nigel as anything other than his partner until now. When he didn't want to give too much away he would use the wrong pronouns and then he'd pretend it had been a simple misuse of the language, a common mistake no one would think too much of. There was something so intimate and real about the word “boyfriend”. It made him feel exposed in a way that he wasn't comfortable with.

"Sí" he ended up saying anyway. Maybe the fact that the man had said it in another language made it easier to digest. It felt less direct, while remaining equally true. "Thank you" was the last thing he said to the man before he went back to stand next to Nigel, a rose in one hand and a Euro in the other.

He offered the coin to Nigel, who looked at it with a mortified expression before taking it.

"Why do you care so much about this? I thought you were the skeptic of the two of us."

"Can't you just play along?"

Nigel shook his head, a smile betraying his annoyed facade and he stood facing the water. He looked at the silvery and golden coin on his open palm for a few seconds, and then he tossed it into the fountain.

"There, are you happy now?" he quipped, glaring at Alex from under his lashes.

"What did you ask for?"

"If I tell you then it won't work. I thought you knew the rules." He smiled at him and for a moment Alex couldn't find the words to answer.

Nigel was narrowing his eyes at the sun's glare, his nose scrunched up adorably and his cheeks a rosy red, burned in a permanent blush since the first week of July. He was looking more healthy and incredibly alive in a way that Alex had never seen before. It was enough to knock the air out of his lungs for a second. Maybe that's why he lost enough of his self-awareness to present the useless flower he'd been tricked into buying, offering it to Nigel in an embarrassingly romantic gesture without giving any sort of explanation. He didn't know why he was doing it either.

Nigel only frowned with a hint of amusement. "What are you doing?" he asked.

The question was enough to bring Alex out of the sudden trance. "I had to buy it to get some change," he tried to justify, starting to feel self-conscious. "I reckon you liked flowers, since you have so many at home."

It was only half a lie. Nigel had become, in Alex's opinion, inexplicably obsessed with plants, more specifically with flowers. He had pots all over the apartment, a million of them covering almost every centimeter of the large balcony. He knew he liked his flowers, but in reality he hadn't been thinking about that when he dumbly stretched out his hand with a red rose, hoping that Nigel would take it.

"Yes, I like *living* flowers," he laughed.

"Oh, so you don't like dead things now? That's new." He knew he was being ridiculous, and the sun couldn't be blamed for the current reddening of his face. But it's not like he could explain his behavior when he himself couldn't understand it. He turned sideways under Nigel's incredulous look, just in time to see the doors of the church opening and people starting to leave. Families walking side by side, talking to each other in friendly chatter.

"Let's just go," he told Nigel and lowered his arm, still holding the rose in his hand.

They didn't go far before Nigel spoke again.

"So, I'm your *boyfriend* , now?"

Alex came to a sudden halt, eyes widening and turning to look at him. "What?"

"You told that man with flowers that I was your boyfriend." He was using that playful tone that came out every time things were going his way. It only made Alex more nervous.

"How did you-"

"You weren't that far away, I could hear you just fine."

"I just didn't think you would understand it."

"What? You really believed that I didn't know any Spanish? After we've been here for almost a year?" he inquired, openly laughing at him at this point.

"I don't know!" Alex shrugged. "At least not enough to understand *that* ."

Nigel shook his head, mouth open in disbelief.

"Cut it out," Alex snarled, looking away mortified. "This is stupid, it doesn't even matter."

And it was stupid indeed. That calling Nigel his boyfriend would be such a big deal, that he had only done it after so long, in another language and only when talking to a stranger who looked very stereotypically gay and was less likely to judge him.

"I think I want my rose now."

The request surprised him.

He turned to look at Nigel, the questioning frown on his face slightly fading as Nigel offered his hand, waiting for Alex to give him the flower. Silently, he complied. Their hands touched the stem at the same time for half a second, their fingers brushing, and then Alex let the rose go. A sudden, sharp pain made him pull away to look at his index finger, where a drop of blood was beginning to form.

"What the fuck? I thought he'd cut the thorns off."

He examined the flower in Nigel's hand and there it was, a single thorn that he'd missed somehow. The stinging pain wasn't particularly bad, it was more inconvenient than anything else for being on his right hand, where he knew he was going to end up hurting himself over and over again without meaning to.

"Can you believe this?" he asked, looking up from the rose to meet

Nigel's eyes.

He didn't seem like he was going to answer though, as he stared at Alex's finger, eyes locked and focused as he brought the flower closer to his chest like he was afraid that Alex was going to take it away in retaliation. The drop of blood fell to the ground, leaving a trail from the tip of his index finger all the way to his wrist. He would've been able to prevent the mess had he not been staring back at Nigel, who was eyeing him like he was a glass of water in the middle of the desert.

Alex let out a breathy laugh. "What are you looking at, freak?" he asked rhetorically.

"The blood," Nigel began anyway, tilting his head pensively. "It looks good on you." He looked up, his pupils expanding over the icy blue iris to stare at Alex. "Does it hurt?"

The question took Alex by surprise, "Of course it hurts" he sneered.

"There's something so pure about pain, don't you think?"

Nigel reached out with the hand not holding the rose and lingered over Alex's hand for a second, perhaps in hesitation or just contemplating the scene in front of him. Finally, under Alex's curious eyes, he brushed his thumb over the place where the thorn had pierced the skin and the soft touch made Alex hiss in pain. Slowly, Nigel pulled his fingers back, now stained with the blood that was already coagulating on Alex's skin, and he seemed to examine them, rubbing his thumb with his index finger and watching the blood spread.

Alex wanted to tell him off, felt the urge to call him a weirdo, tell him that what he was doing was disgusting and strange. But that was old habits, just pure muscle memory kicking in, the voice in the back of his mind screaming *this isn't normal,* a voice that was getting weaker and quieter each day. He pulled a gray handkerchief from his pocket and cleaned his hand with it, the blood coming off easily.

"Okay, give me your hand, vampire," he told Nigel, reaching for him and taking the hand himself to clean it. Once he couldn't see any more blood on Nigel's fingers, he let go of him. "Now this is going to be stained, brilliant."

The gray fabric was now covered in red that was rapidly drying. It was truly incredible how much damage two droplets could make. He

folded it with the blood on the inside and put it back in his pocket. When he looked up, Nigel was watching him with a knowing smile.

"What?" he asked dumbly.

"Nothing," Nigel shook his head, taking a step closer to him. "I just felt this strange urge to kiss you." And in a second he was in Alex's space and there was nothing else he could do but comply.

It had gotten easier to kiss Nigel during the past year, for more than one reason. He had always wanted to, it was not for a lack of desire that he'd stopped himself before, but as time went on he didn't hesitate to do it as often as he could. There was no need to hold himself back, not when they were alone and at home. Even now, when he felt the light breeze on his skin and he listened to people's voices as they walked by, mere meters away from them, he couldn't help but lean in to taste Nigel's lips and bask in the warmth of his breath. He could hold him now, really hold him against his body. They'd both gotten a couple of centimeters taller, and as much as he loved being able to tower over Nigel, he'd learned to enjoy how their mouths could meet faster now, as the height difference between them lessened.

But as most things in their life tended to go, something had to shatter their moment and bring them back to reality.

"¡Dios mío!"A feminine voice exclaimed, startling them enough to make them draw back from each other.

"Y tan cerca de la Iglesia, ¡qué falta de respeto!" Another one said.

Alex turned to them, two women who were probably over sixty were walking by and looking at them in evident disgust. A cold rush went through his body, the not so old fears that he was just now learning to confront resurfacing and almost destroying all the confidence he'd managed to build over the last months.

"Esta gente no tiene respeto por nada, por esas cosas es que se van al infierno" The first one said again and they both walked away, continuing to say things that he couldn't hear or understand very well. It was probably for the best.

An awkward silence fell over them. He couldn't bear to look at Nigel, too embarrassed to face him. He wasn't even sure if he'd been able to understand what they'd said, since he was clearly misinformed about Nigel's linguistic skills. Although he was sure that when you were a

man kissing your boyfriend in public and two people told you that you were both going to hell, especially when they spoke in that tone and looked at you the way those women had done, there was a universal language being used that you couldn't possibly fail to understand.

He stared at the ground, asking himself why had been so stupid, why he'd thought they could just do whatever they wanted.

But why couldn't they, really?

Frustration quickly turned to anger as he looked in the direction where the women had gone.

You don't know who we are , Alex thought. *You have no idea what we could do to you.*

His mind filled with thoughts of revenge against many more people than just those two.

When he turned to look at Nigel, he found him already looking at him. He didn't seem to be particularly bothered, but he was clutching the rose close with both hands. Some of that shame came back when he considered that Nigel probably had much more experience than him with this sort of situation.

"Let's go," he told him. "It makes no sense to be outside in this heat when we just got our air-con fixed."

"It's going to break again, Iván said we shouldn't use it so much."

"Fuck Iván!" He put his arm around Nigel's shoulders and pressed him against his side as they started to walk back to their apartment.

August 17, 2008

The doors slammed closed behind Alex when he walked into "Alicia's". At eight thirty in the morning the place was practically deserted and he wouldn't even consider going in so early if he hadn't been looking for something of his.

"Woah!" a high voice exclaimed as a short, slim body collided with him in the doorway to the break room. "What are you doing here, Alan?"

An entire year of this and he still wasn't used to the name. He was Alan at work, Alex at home and sometimes Jack, when Nigel felt like

calling him that.

"Get out of my way, Lisa," Alex practically hissed, pushing away from the girl.

She whistled a playful melody, stepping back to let him pass. "Grumpy much?" she mocked. "Haven't had your coffee yet, huh?"

Lisa was the first person in Spain he had spoken with longer than five minutes, not counting Nigel. She was a half Spanish, half American college student who usually worked his same shift, Sunday mornings being one of the few exceptions.

Out of all the things Alex ever thought he would be doing with his life at 19, being a bartender had not crossed his mind at all. He was not meant to serve, or at least, he didn't feel like he was, but there weren't that many options to choose from and there were definitely worse things to do for a living.

They weren't exactly short of money. After they'd sold a set of Nigel's mother's jewelry and had resigned to the fact that living in Madrid was way too expensive, things had been a lot easier. The apartment they had rented in Granada was bigger than the one in Skye. It had a big balcony that Nigel had populated with his strange plants, and two bedrooms, even though they were only using the one. But no amount of comfort and tranquility could make them forget that money wasn't infinite, and Alex had never been good at staying still anyway, so the job search had started the minute they set foot in Granada.

"Don't," he warned her. "I'm not in the mood." The door to his locker opened up with its usual creaking sound and he rummaged inside.

"You look like shit," Lisa deadpanned, coming to lean against the locker next to him. "And you came in through the front door. You know Alicia doesn't like that."

"Tell someone who cares," he growled.

In reality, he cared a lot. The only reason he got the job in the first place is because, according to the owner Alicia, he was *"tall, had freckles and customers liked the funny accent".* In other words, she only wanted him for his presence.

Alicia was a 53 year old woman with a weird obsession with beauty and elegance. She had seen Alex sitting all by himself at the bar when he stopped by after a day of job hunting, and she immediately asked

him if he was interested in working for her. He had been quick to inform her of his lack of experience in bartending, but she hadn't cared in the slightest.

"¿Sabe habla' español?" She'd asked him after he'd expressed his concerns.

"Sí, señora"

"Then that's all you need, and don't call me señora, I'm not so old."

Alex thought that her reasons for hiring him were more than questionable and he'd found the comment about his accent quite ironic coming from her since he could tell that even in Spanish, she had a very peculiar way of speaking. But he was a fast learner and he had been looking for a job, after all.

Of course, they hadn't put him behind the bar right away. There was a training period where he only cleaned tables and washed dishes for a while, but he got the hang of it pretty fast. He was replacing some guy named Sebastián, who'd suddenly gone to live in Germany and left the rest of the staff working overtime to compensate for the loss. Needless to say, they were glad to finally have someone new to take on those hours again.

"Where's my jacket?" Alex asked, having failed to find it inside the locker.

"Oh, so *that's* why you're here."

"I'm serious." He turned to her, lips pursed in a thin line.

She smiled at him teasingly. "I have it. You should be thankful that I took it, you know that Enzo would've stolen it." She turned to her own locker, signaling for him to follow her.

"Why do you think I'm here so early after working until 2 AM?"

She opened the locker and took out his black leather jacket and handed it to him.

"I don't know why you brought it anyways, it's not like it's cold." She rolled her eyes as he grabbed the jacket and put it under his arm.

He was about to take his leave when she gasped and grabbed him by the arm. "Oh my god! Is that a hickey?"

His face reddened and his hand went instinctively to his neck where

his white shirt had obviously failed to cover the mark.

"It is!" She laughed excitedly. "So *that's* why you're always all covered up, isn't it?"

"Shut up," he barked, but no amount of attitude could cover up his embarrassment.

"It's ok, I knew you were too cute to be single."

The word *cute* made him wince internally, but he was used to Lisa's taunting and there was no use trying to fight it off, it would only make it worse for him.

"I'm leaving now," he said, walking out of the room and through the back door to the alley.

"Wait! Have a cigarette with me." She walked after him, the door closing behind them.

"I can't."

"Since when?"

It was a fair question to ask. He'd picked up the habit of smoking a few months back. She was usually his companion during each break. He turned around to face her, a decision about to be made when he looked at her wide green eyes, almost the same shade as his. She could be trusted, at least with the minor things. She knew how to be quiet and it was about time that he shared some of his life with her, given that he knew almost all of hers.

"If I have one now I'll be smelling of smoke for hours, and I have to get home now." He paused to look around hesitantly, shifting his weight from side to side and crossing his arms around himself. "He doesn't like it when he can tell I've been smoking."

Lisa frowned and then her eyes widened in realization, awe transforming her face.

"Oh, I see."

Alex nodded, biting his lower lip. It was an awkward way of coming out, if that could be considered coming out at all.

"So, you're gay?"

I'm *not* gay," he immediately protested, looking around once again, fearing that someone might hear them.

"Calm down, it's not an insult, you know?"

"Well, I'm not."

"Okay." Her laugh did little to make him feel better. "So you're like, into girls too?"

An exasperated groan left him. "I don't have the time for this." He turned around and left her laughing at him.

August 24, 2008

At 7:00 AM that Sunday Alex opened the door to their apartment to find Nigel sprawled out on the couch, completely asleep. He sighed in resignation. It was exactly what he'd feared would happen when he had sent a text to Nigel the night before, telling him that he wouldn't be returning home until the next morning. He had to cover a shift, he was exhausted, annoyed, and in serious need of sleep or coffee– whichever he managed to get first. But mostly, he was worried. He walked in, softly closing the door behind him as quietly as he could. He took off his shoes in the entryway and walked in stocking feet to the bedroom, being as quiet as he possibly could. He found the bed unmade, like Nigel had actually been sleeping there before moving to the couch. The sight worried him, but not as much as it would have a year or even a few months ago. There were some things that he couldn't change. He went inside the bathroom, washed his hands and looked in the mirror. He looked as tired as he felt. He took off the maroon vest of his uniform and threw it on the bed, taking a deep breath of relief from having one less layer of clothing on. The white shirt followed. During the night the heat wasn't as suffocating, but as soon as the sun came up, wearing long sleeves *and* a vest on top became a torture. That's why he always ended up with the sleeves rolled up.

He left the room in only the dark dress slacks and white undershirt to sit on the couch a couple of centimeters away from Nigel. He sighed again when he realized the fool hadn't even rested his head on a cushion.

"Nigel," Alex called in a low voice.

Immediately, Nigel stirred, his eyes slowly fluttering open and looking

around with a disoriented expression until he saw him.

"Alex." He smiled lazily, looking up at him.

"What are you doing here?"

"What do you mean?"

"On the couch, why aren't you in bed?"

Nigel blinked slowly, the smile never leaving his face. "I was waiting for you."

Alex was exhausted, he just wanted to sleep the day away and not be bothered. He did not have the energy to deal with this.

"Nigel," he started, closing his eyes to gather some inner strength. "I told you I wasn't coming until morning. Didn't you see my message?" He turned around, searching the room for Nigel's BlackBerry.

A yes was the only answer he got.

"Then why are you not sleeping?" The exasperation must've been evident in his tone.

"I *was* sleeping," he argued, sitting up to look at Alex directly. "Until you woke me up."

Alex eyed the state of the couch with suspicion. The cushions were all in a corner and there were no sheets on it. Nigel had been sleeping in an odd position and the way he'd woken up so easily indicated that he wasn't sleeping so well. Whatever his intentions had been when he moved from the bed to the couch, sleep surely hadn't been one of them.

Nigel's head came to rest against his shoulder and cold –always so cold– fingers intertwined with Alex's over his thigh.

"They have stopped looking," he murmured after a while.

Alex made a questioning hum, to which Nigel clarified, "For me, and Helen and John."

It shouldn't sound odd to him by now that he referred to his parents by their names, after everything that had happened to them. But still, almost two years in and he had to take a second to realize who he was talking about. The fact that they were never brought up in

conversation didn't help much either. Sometimes it was easier to pretend that they didn't exist. Now, whenever he looked at the emerald pendant he kept in a drawer of his bedside table, he didn't think of Helen Colbie, not anymore. It belonged to him and no one else.

"You looked it up?" He felt Nigel nodding against him.

"I wanted to know what they were doing with the house, which is nothing, by the way. We didn't have anyone in the family who had the right to claim it, so it'll probably stay empty for a good ten years before it's bought by anyone."

He turned Alex's hand so the palm was facing up and traced the skin from his wrists to his fingertips in a slow and repetitive movement. Alex watched him in silence, and let him continue.

"John wasn't on good terms with the Order, so it seems they focused on finding him a replacement. No one really cares about Helen. Her side of the family practically sold her off to him when they got married, I barely ever met any of them. And me, well…" He let out a breathy laugh. "I'm not a minor anymore, so I'm not a priority. And with no one to push the police around and no new evidence, the case is cold."

Silence fell over them as Alex pondered the new information. By all means, it was exactly what he'd been hoping would happen. If no one was looking for them, there were fewer chances that they would be found out. Eventually people would forget about it and they would be safe. Nevertheless, it was a conflicting realization, that you could disappear and be forgotten, never to be thought of again.

"Your father though," Nigel interrupted his musing. "He's still looking for you."

And wasn't that even more conflicting to find out. He'd never lost the habit of checking the news, purposely looking for information about their case, the only difference being that, while he used to check almost every week, now he would look once every couple of months. But he had only thought to read official statements by the police, and finding out what his father was doing or what he'd said to the press hadn't been something he wanted to do at all. So he didn't.

"How do you know?"

"He gave an interview for an article, published about two months ago

by some journalist for a paper no one reads. He said that he was asking the police for more information, pressuring them to keep looking, but they're not listening to him." He straightened up then, pushing away from Alex and leaning against the back of the couch, his hand softly trailing over his arm until he finally let go. "He said that he's *never going to stop looking for his son,* " he quoted, his voice an octave lower than normal.

"Well, that's too bad for him," Alex deadpanned, standing up and walking towards the windows and opening them. "Because he's never going to find me," he concluded as the first rays of the Sunday sun illuminated the room. He turned to face Nigel, ready to force an overconfident grin, but the other one was already walking towards him, looking wary with his hands crossed over his chest.

"Do you ever think of going back?" he asked, standing in front of Alex. "Do you not fantasize about the life you would've had, if none of this had happened?"

"I don't," he answered without hesitation. Then a thought crossed his mind. "Do you?" he asked.

Nigel's mouth curved upwards the tiniest bit, not entirely a smile there, but almost, and he shook his head. "There was nothing else before this, before you." He uncrossed his arms and took two steps towards Alex, stopping only centimeters from him. "Before, I was incomplete, but now," he purred against his lips. "We are one, Alex. Why would I ever want anything else?" He sealed the question with a chaste kiss, significantly less intense than Alex had been expecting.

When they parted, he looked into Nigel's eyes, the long, dark lashes fluttering as they opened. He looked tired, but Alex knew it was only from staying up too late and sleeping on the couch and not from bearing that heavy weight that Nigel tended to carry on his shoulders. He knew that because Nigel also looked happy, content, something that probably neither of them had ever thought they would be.

As Alex ushered Nigel towards their room, expecting to waste the day away making up for the lost hours of sleep, he asked himself the same question, *why would I ever want anything else?*

He couldn't find an answer to that.

Chapter End Notes

Translation of the bits in Spanish:

"-Buenos días. ¿Tiene cambio?": Good morning. Do you have change?
"No creo, pero si me compras eso puede cambiar": I don't think so, but if you buy something that might change.
"Una rosa": A rose.
"Para el novio": For the boyfriend.

"Y tan cerca de la Iglesia, ¡qué falta de respeto!": And so close to the church! How disrespectful!
"Esta gente no tiene respeto por nada, por esas cosas es que se van al infierno": These people have no respect for anything, that's why they go to hell.

"Sabe hablar español?": Do you speak Spanish?
"Sí, señora": Yes, ma'am.

Drink what you leak, smoke what you sigh

Chapter Notes

> Let's play a game called "how many parallels and references can you find?"

See the end of the chapter for more notes

At only thirty minutes from finishing his shift, Alex was already way too annoyed to be talking to patrons. Part of his job was to make conversation; he wasn't merely bartending in the most practical meaning of the word. He was supposed to act polite and charming, to provide company to lonely drinkers but also know when to leave them alone. Normally he wouldn't complain. He had gotten good enough at it to find it easy, but he wasn't doing his regular 7:00 p.m. to 2:00 a.m. shift. Instead he had switched with someone else as a favor, and now he was stuck with the dull afternoon shift. He was tired, bored, and regretting his most recent life decisions.

"Here he is, the traitor," said a voice from behind him as he felt a light weight suddenly resting on his right shoulder.

He turned to see Lisa holding a cocktail spoon against his neck. "You abandoned me to deal with Enzo all by myself!"

Alex scoffed, amused, and slapped the spoon away from him. "You're not alone," he said, turning back to grab a couple of dirty glasses from the bar and putting them aside to wash. "Elizabeth switched with me, she's going to be here with you tonight."

She groaned. "You know that Lizzie's always high."

"So are you!" he laughed, taking the spoon from her and putting it back in its place.

"Yeah, but at least I can make conversation." Lisa rolled her eyes at him. "She just smiles and nods all the time, that's no fun," she whined, crossing her arms over her torso.

"A real tragedy. It must be so hard to be you," Alex mocked.

There was only one person sitting at the bar at the moment, and the guy was glued to his phone, not paying attention to them at all. That was the only reason they could get away with wasting so much time

messing around and talking. Alex looked at the time on his watch, twenty minutes until seven. It was Friday, and soon they would start getting a lot more people as the evening progressed. But that was someone else's problem.

"Are you in a rush to leave?" Lisa asked, as she leaned against the bar rail, combing the dark red hair of her ponytail with her fingers.

He nodded, sighing deeply. "You're not the only one cursed with a boring shift."

He was itching to get his vest off, or get a cigarette. Usually there was so much to do that he wouldn't realize how tired he was until the night was over and the exhaustion came crashing down on him at once, but with no distractions it was harder to ignore his body. He was never going to take Elizabeth's shift again, he was sure of that.

"Is everyone here already?" he asked.

"Lizzie's not here yet, I think, but she always shows up at the last minute."

Alex hummed in response, starting to clean the wooden surface of the bar top with a rag.

"Would you get Enzo out here so I can leave?" It might've sounded like a request, but he meant it more as a command.

"Why don't *you* go get him?" she countered with a raised eyebrow.

"I can't leave the bar unattended."

"But there's barely anyone here!" She gestured around the half empty bar as if to illustrate the point.

"You know the rules," he shrugged.

She groaned in distaste and, in spite of her complaints, she walked out the door to the break room to do as he asked.

Enjoying his victory and the fact that he was about to leave, Alex finished sorting out everything he still had left to do before handing over the bar over to Enzo. They usually had the same schedule, but from the few times he'd had to work the earlier shift he knew that no matter how much effort he put into making everything look pristine, that guy was always going to complain about something. That's why

when he was finally done and someone sat down across from him on one of the bar stools, he thought he might scream. Looking up from the sink, he noticed the person's hands: white, thin knuckles and rosy palms that looked all too familiar but struck him as strange in this context.

"I can't believe my luck. Wherever I go, you're already there," the deep voice said, and recognition made his heart flutter inside his chest as he met a set of blue eyes that he knew very well. "Must be fate." Nigel smiled at him.

"What are you doing here?" he asked dumbly.

"I knew you would be off early today and I was done at the pharmacy. I knew you wouldn't be expecting me." He leaned back on the stool, a pleased smirk on his lips. "I have to say that seeing that surprised look on your face was definitely worth it."

Alex shook his head incredulously and checked the time again. He wasn't going to work a minute longer than he was supposed to, he didn't care if there was someone to replace him or not. "I'm done here," he said, and signaled Nigel to go around the bar. "Come with me, I can't leave through the front door."

Nigel got down from his seat and slowly made his way to the back of the bar, looking around with observant eyes, the way he always did when he went somewhere for the first time. Alex almost felt guilty for never bringing him before. Of course, he'd made sure that Nigel knew where he was working, and it was near enough to their apartment that they'd walked by a few times together. But Nigel had never come through these doors before. There was never a time when it would make sense for him to be here, he didn't drink after all and even Alex only spent time here while he was working, which was usually very late. After Nigel had started working for that naturopathic doctor at the pharmacy, their schedules didn't allow them to see each other much anyway. It was a shame; the place was decorated in dark red and black with golden details, all within Alicia's peculiar tastes, and the colors made Nigel stand out even more than he usually did in any context. The dark royal blue of his shirt, the natural contrast of his white skin and dark hair, and even the way he moved with his hands in the pockets of his black trousers, looking at everything with calculating eyes, made him appear exceptionally unique, different from everyone else at the bar. At this point, Alex wasn't even sure if he was the only one who could look at Nigel and *see* how special he was, or if it was just as obvious to everyone else.

He walked behind him, barely resisting the need to put his hand on Nigel's lower back as he directed him towards the break room. Enzo walked past them before they reached the door, his brown eyes narrowing on Alex and then swiftly glancing at Nigel with a frown before he continued towards the bar, not a word directed at them. At least he didn't need to worry about leaving his post unattended anymore, Alex thought.

He let Nigel go through the door first, staying just a step behind him. He heard Lisa's voice speaking before he saw her.

"Disculpe, no puede-" She tried to stop Nigel until her eyes landed on Alex, who closed the door behind him.

"He's with me."

Her eyes widened, going from Nigel to him and then back to Nigel before saying anything. "Oh, he's your-"

"Yeah." He cut her off, going straight for his locker and starting to take off his vest. He couldn't wait to leave–there was something about his co-workers and Nigel interacting that didn't sit right with him. Never bringing Nigel to work was starting to make sense again.

"Hi! I'm Lisa," he heard her say. "And you are…"

"Noah," Nigel answered, the name he'd been using for over a year coming easily to him now.

Alex closed the locker with a loud slam and turned to them. "You," he pointed at Lisa. "Stay the fuck away from him."

"Alan! Don't be a dick!" She gently slapped his hand away. "I'm just being friendly. I'm not going to do anything to him." She laughed, raising her eyebrows at Nigel, who gave her a small grin in response. Alex knew that couldn't be good.

It's not him I'm worried about, he thought. He reached out for Nigel unconsciously, his hand falling on the back of his neck, until he thought better of it and dropped it back to his side. "Let's get out of here already."

Nigel followed him outside without protest, saying his goodbyes to Lisa.

A few minutes later, as they walked alongside each other on their way

back to the apartment Nigel broke the silence. "Are you uncomfortable with me coming to see you? Is there a reason you don't want me to meet your friends?"

"They're not friends, just people I work with," Alex grumbled. "And I'm not uncomfortable. I just like to keep things separate."

"Ah," Nigel huffed. "You want to keep me all to yourself, then." Their shoulders bumped together, and their fingers touched briefly. No one would bat an eye if Alex decided to hold his hand right there. Not at this time of the day, when people were leaving from work, either to get home and rest or have a bit of fun on a Friday night. Not in that lonely alley, where the shadows of the buildings made everything darker and they were less likely to be seen. But they weren't the type to hold hands, not in public anyway.

"Don't be so full of yourself. Not everything's about you."

Nigel hummed in agreement. "You're right," he said. "Sometimes it's about *us* ."

Alex didn't know what he was supposed to say to that.

Alex watched the sky that morning. It was grayish blue and cloudy, a promise of rain within the next few hours. It was a few minutes past eight, and he had already burned through two cigarettes and was currently starting on his third. Nigel wouldn't like that, but he was still asleep and there were thoughts inside Alex's mind that needed to be soothed.

Standing on the balcony and leaning against the wall, he let his eyes wander over the orchids. Some of them had already bloomed and their leaves had grown through the bars in search of the sun outside. They were truly beautiful, he had to admit. Nigel had turned out to have quite a gift. When he'd first started bringing in pots and seeds and branches with flowers, Alex truly thought they'd all die by the end of the first week. He knew better than to underestimate Nigel now, for many reasons. After all, it seemed that he was just as capable of nurturing life as he was of taking it away. He had just lit his fourth cigarette and barely had time to start inhaling when he heard soft footsteps coming behind him. He dropped it to the floor and stepped on it without thinking, and when he turned around he was met with an angry glare. He looked at the discarded cigarette, ash all over the brown tiles of the balcony, and then back at Nigel with a sheepish expression. He wasn't used to smoking inside the apartment, normally

he would just sit outside the bar and drop them on the ground in the alley. Startled, his muscle memory had kicked in, forgetting that he had an ashtray on the coffee table not a meter away from him. Said ashtray was now the subject of Nigel's hateful glare.

"I thought you were still sleeping," Alex rushed in to explain himself.

"And you took the chance to contaminate your lungs behind my back," he accused, walking past him and lifting one side of the ashtray with his hand, looking at the evidence of Alex's crime with disdain before letting it drop back on the table unceremoniously.

Alex thought he would have to fight the urge to argue with him, but he realized that he had little wish to do so. He had accepted Nigel's rules far better than he ever could have imagined. For someone so rebellious, he was very good at following orders, especially Nigel's.

"What are you doing up so early, anyway?"

Nigel stifled a yawn with his hand before answering. He was dressed only in his gray pajama pants, his naked torso on full display. "I'll remind you that some of us work during the day," he countered, with no real heat in his voice. Alex had gotten better at guessing his moods by now and it appeared that the betrayal hadn't upset him as badly as he had made it seem.

Alex watched him stand in front of a green rose he'd planted not that long ago in a brown clay pot. His fingertips caressed the soft petals, and Alex realized it must've bloomed during the night, because he didn't remember having seen it the day before. Green was an odd color for a rose; it blended in with the orchid's leaves behind it, so perhaps he'd simply missed it.

"Were you meaning to tell me something?"

Alex startled for the second time that morning, the question taking him by surprise.

"What do you mean?"

"I've never seen you smoke so early, never mind three or four in a row," he said without turning to look at him. "So, what's got you so anxious?"

Alex shifted his weight from one foot to the other and crossed his arms over his chest. "It's nothing bad," he said, not knowing whether

he was trying to reassure Nigel or himself.

"Then tell me."

He bit his lip and then sighed, resigned. "I'm thinking of going to the university here, getting a degree."

That made Nigel pause. He turned towards Alex, not letting go of the rose in his hand. "A degree in…?"

"History," he answered, noticing the small smile Nigel gave in response as he turned his attention back to the plants in front of him.

"Of course," he said, so quietly Alex barely heard it.

"There's a good program here and I just need to take an exam. I checked the admission requirements and I have everything it takes to get in," he rushed to explain, moving closer to Nigel with fidgeting hands, only the coffee table standing between them.

It was true, they had a *fake* paper that said they had finished their education back in the UK. They might as well have, since they had left just a few months short of graduation. And with the money from Helen Colbie's pearls, he didn't have to worry about much else, even if he hadn't been trying to get into a public university. He told Nigel as much.

"You have thought a lot about this." The orchids were now the focus of his attention, purple, blue and red petals a beautiful contrast with Nigel's porcelain skin. "And it seems that you already have everything you need to accomplish it."

"Yeah, I guess I do," Alex replied, unsure of where Nigel was going with this. He *had* been thinking about it for a while now, he wouldn't have brought it up otherwise. His hands toyed with a loose thread on the hem of his t-shirt, forgetting to be careful not to pull too hard.

"Then why are you asking for my permission?"

Lifting his eyes from where he'd been watching Nigel's hands, he saw that his attention was now fixed on him, electric blue and dark pupils looking straight through him in that way that made him feel like Nigel could read his mind.

"I don't need your permission!" he protested, crossing his arms again and taking a step back.

"I didn't say you did," Nigel corrected softly. The tiniest of smiles appeared on his face again, seemingly to annoy Alex. "But you *are* asking for it, aren't you?"

It was absurd, Alex thought. For the first time in his life he was doing exactly what he wanted and nothing else. He didn't need anyone's permission to do *anything* , Nigel wasn't the exception. But, if that was true, then *why* had he waited so long to tell him about his plans? Why had he done his research in secret, when Nigel was at work and not there to see him?

He looked at the ashtray and the lighter next to it. He couldn't tell anymore, but he knew that the balcony had to smell of smoke. He had chosen to smoke there because it was easier to ventilate, the smell would only stay for a few minutes and he had been planning to clean it anyway. Just so Nigel wouldn't be upset, because he didn't like him smoking inside and Alex wanted to please him.

His hands were sweaty and he had been about to smoke four or more cigarettes in one morning, when he usually had to keep them in the fridge so they wouldn't go stale. He had decided the night before that he was going to tell him the next morning. *As soon as he wakes up,* he'd said to himself.

He wanted–no, he *needed* Nigel's approval.

He cleared his throat awkwardly, overcome by his own realization, not knowing how to answer without giving away too much of his inner turmoil.

"You have it, in any case," Nigel filled the silence for him. "I was wondering when you would get tired of leading a simple life. You are meant to be recognized and you won't get that by working at a bar."

And just like that, it was solved. Nigel went to make breakfast, and Alex was left alone with his thoughts on the balcony, staring at a green rose.

It was torture watching Nigel get dressed and not being able to stop him. He did it with such grace, his back turned to Alex as he pulled the white linen shirt slowly to cover his shoulders. The washed out blue jeans loosely fitted over his hips with no belt to hold them made him wonder how they managed to stay on throughout the day.

Nigel was truly beautiful, breathtakingly so. All his life, Alex had been more than satisfied just looking at girls. He liked the soft skin and subtle curves and the delicate features of their faces. He enjoyed being taller than most of them, how they had to look up to talk to him and stand on the tip of their toes to kiss him or have him lean down to do it himself. Girls were enough; he could ignore the sudden nervousness he felt when some of his classmates took their clothes off in front of him in the showers, or how sometimes the sound of a deep voice could make him shiver with excitement. There was no point in acting on his feelings. It was only physical attraction after all, no more than that. But looking at Nigel now, it was obvious to him that he never stood a chance. From the moment they'd set eyes on each other, he had been doomed. They were almost 20 years old, and as Alex grew visibly older, sharpening edges replacing the softer look that had stayed with him even after puberty, Nigel's baby face still remained. The only indication that almost 3 years had passed were a couple of extra centimeters added to his height and the way his voice became huskier and deeper with each passing day. Everything else was still the same, and the pouty lips and long lashes along with his slim figure made him look a lot younger than he was. For the first time in his life, Alex felt grateful that he wasn't very masculine looking himself, otherwise people would have a hard time believing they were the same age.

When Nigel turned to him with his shirt unbuttoned and a questioning look on his face, there was little else he could do but to step forward and slowly button it up for him.

"Do you want me to walk you to the pharmacy?" he asked with his eyes set on his hands as he pushed the small white button through the buttonhole, watching Nigel's fair skin disappear behind the fabric.

"No, I want to be alone for a while." A statement that would've set off a million alarm bells inside Alex's head before, but to which he knew not to overreact now. Nigel was a loner, he needed his space and oftentimes he liked to go out by himself and just walk. That didn't mean Alex didn't worry anyway, he had grown extremely observant of Nigel's every move. He had missed the signs of a breakdown once and it had almost cost them everything. It would not happen again. Nigel knew him just as well as he did Nigel and must've sensed his worry, because when Alex looked up he was looking at him fondly.

"Don't worry, no one will steal me away," he reassured, leaning closer to leave a soft kiss on his lips. He was still smiling when they parted.

"I'm not worried about that. Anyone who takes you will give you back as soon as you start talking." Alex let go of his shirt without closing the top 2 buttons, leaving his collarbones peeking out. Nigel looked down at the exposed skin and then back at him with a raised eyebrow.

"Get some vitamin D or something, you're extremely pale. Your skin doesn't even know what the sun is." It wasn't a lie per se. Nigel *was* very pale, and with autumn right around the corner his chances of getting some good sun exposure were running out. Alex tended to get tanned, the skin on his arms and face filling with even more freckles, whereas Nigel would only get sunburned, no matter how much sunscreen he wore. But he wasn't fooling anyone with his excuses. The fact was that Nigel looked damn good in that white shirt but in Alex's opinion, he would look even better if he showed some skin.

The chuckle he received in response told him that Nigel wasn't buying it. "Fine," he conceded anyway. "If you're so worried about my well-being, then I'll do as you say."

He would change again once he got behind the counter, Alex knew that, but he got to see him like this now, so he would enjoy it while he could.

Nigel left and Alex spent the rest of his day cleaning the balcony and going through Granada University's website.

Sometimes, the staff of Alicia's, the ones between 18 and 25 at least, would stay after closing time just to share a few drinks together. It was a tradition started by Alicia herself that had remained alive even after she stopped coming around the bar that often. Almost every time, Alex joined them. He found comfort in the social interaction after months spent with only Nigel for company. The conversation wasn't particularly good, but the alcohol was decent and he'd never been too selective about the people he surrounded himself with. He'd missed the tasteless jokes and the meaningless banter between friends, the secrets, the childhood stories and the inappropriate comments made late at night when they were far too tired and young to care about politeness. The scenery had changed; now instead of a poorly lit basement with dusty shelves, he spent his time in an oddly decorated bar and a cloud of smoke.

Sometimes he wondered what had become of Raj, what he'd done with his life. He'd never fit in with him and Josh, he was too nice, too serious. What would he think of Alex now? He probably didn't even

remember they'd ever met in the first place.

Nostalgia didn't have time to creep into his thoughts because Lisa was smacking his left arm repeatedly as she laughed at something Mateo had said. Annoyed, he pushed her hand away and drank the last of the whiskey in his glass.

"Más?" Mateo offered next to him, pushing the bottle in his direction. The locks he usually kept neatly tied up away from his face were now loosely falling over his shoulders, black rope-like strands contrasting with the white shirt of his uniform.

Alex considered the offer, looking at Mateo's amber eyes that reminded him of the very whiskey he was drinking and the honey he used for Nigel's tea and toast. Ultimately he declined, and Mateo nodded in response, taking the bottle back and pouring himself some more.

"Oh no," Lisa said, grabbing his arm. "You have that look again."

"What look?"

"Like you wanna leave already."

He huffed, looking around them. They were sitting at one of the tables in the bar, the rest had the chairs pulled up, waiting for the next day of work to start. Enzo was talking on the phone on the other side of the room, pointlessly flicking a lighter in his hand, a nervous habit of his. Alex looked down to the cigarette he had been smoking, held between his index and middle finger and half its original size. It was only his fifth one of the day. He brought it to his mouth and breathed in. On the wall in front of him the clock said it was thirty minutes past two in the morning.

"It's getting late," he said, the words coming out with a small cloud of gray smoke.

"It's *not* ," she insisted. "What? Do you have anything better to do?"

"Sleep," he retorted, and then more quietly added, "-and fuck my boyfriend."

Mateo let out a breathy laugh and looked a little embarrassed when Alex turned to him. He couldn't see a blush on his dark skin, but he didn't need to.

It was new, speaking of these things out loud, but Alex found it easier when it was said to strangers or people whose opinion he didn't care about as much. Not to mention that he'd thought Mateo didn't know enough English to understand him, but perhaps he simply chose not to speak the language. There was also the possibility that the phrase *"fuck my boyfriend"* was too obvious to miss.

"Ok, fine." Lisa laughed as well. "I can't exactly argue with that."

He dropped the cigarette on a plate on the table after taking a final drag, stood up from his chair, and went to collect his things from his locker.

In the break room, he put his wallet and keys in one of his pants pockets and his cellphone in the one on his vest. He was about to leave through the back door when he realized he'd left his lighter on the table with Lisa and Mateo. He turned back inside, a conversation greeting him as he opened the door.

"Ah, Alan," Enzo said, standing beside Lisa, who was still sitting at the table. "I was just talking about you."

"I'm leaving now, I just came back for this." He took the red and black lighter and showed it to him.

"Oh, but this is important," Enzo insisted, his accent making every 't' sound louder than the rest of the letters. "I was just saying that for weeks now we've been working overtime on Sundays because we don't have enough people. Just having one more of us would make things a lot easier."

Alex shook his head with a humorless laugh. "No, no, Enzo, you know I don't work on Sundays."

"No, I know that," he challenged. "I just don't understand why. Is it like a religious thing? Do you have to go to mass?" he joked.

"I don't owe you an explanation, you're not my boss."

"Yes," Lisa intervened, rolling her eyes at them. "So just drop it, Lorenzo. It's way too late for this."

Enzo ignored her, raising a dark eyebrow at him and crossing his arms over his torso. "I mean it, why are you so busy on Sundays that you can't help out a little?"

Alex could feel himself starting to get pissed off. "I'm not the only one who doesn't, why are you taking it out on me?"

"You're the new guy. Everyone else has been here for over a year, at least. We've all worked overtime, we help each other when we have to."

"If you don't like the way things work, you can ask Alicia to hire someone else. I'm doing what I'm being paid to do."

The conversation had already started off confrontational, but now they were both just two meters apart, glaring and narrowing their eyes at each other with gritted teeth.

"He just has stuff to do, ok? It's none of your business." Lisa had come to stand next to him at some point, but Mateo was simply watching the situation unfold from his seat with a concerned look.

"Is that the day you save for your boyfriend?"

Alex froze. He didn't know how Enzo had guessed it, but he was right. Sundays and Mondays were the only days Nigel didn't have to work, and Alex had asked Alicia to have Sundays off so they could spend the day together. He usually worked at night, so that meant he could stay with Nigel on Monday mornings and afternoons as well.

" *Enzo,* " Lisa warned.

"Look, I don't care who he wants to fuck, but I don't like that we're working our asses off here while he's out there sucking dick."

Later, Alex will realize that things didn't have to go that far. He could've walked away from the argument and gone home, and no one would've stopped him. But instead, he lost perspective for a second and before he knew what was happening, he found himself on top of Enzo, his fist hitting his face over and over again. There was blood on Enzo's face, more than what his hands should have been able to draw from him, and he realized he had the lighter between his fingers.

Lisa was screaming in the background and someone pulled him back with incredible force. He stumbled out of their hold, pure rage clouding his vision.

"Do you feel good? Huh?" Enzo yelled from where he was trying to stand up. "Does it feel good to vent your anger on me?" He spit red on the floor and muttered "cabrón maricón de mierda" under his breath.

"Go, Alan, just go," Lisa was telling him in a distressed voice.

Mateo went to help Enzo, and Alex noticed that it had been him who had separated them. He resented him for that.

Even as he left the room and then the bar, he knew that he still wanted to keep fighting. There was blood on his hands, the sound of his own breathing was loud in his ears, and his knuckles were pulled tight as he held the lighter inside his closed fist.

He found the door to their apartment in a daze, walking there automatically, not a single coherent thought in his mind. Putting the key inside the lock and opening it was a struggle, his hand hurt and his head was dizzy. When he entered, the first thing he saw was the raven, perched on the bookshelf in their living room, recently positioned there at his request. Then his eyes focused enough to look straight in front of him, and the sight of Nigel, sitting on the couch with a book, wide-eyed and looking beautiful, *so stunningly beautiful* , greeted him.

Alex felt like he was ready to pass out, and so he did.

Chapter End Notes

At the time of this chapter being posted this story has reached and exceeded 1k hits. I'm shocked. I didn't think this would get more than 20 hits so I'm positively surprised. I want to give a huge thank you to everyone who's commented, left a kudo or just read it, really. This is incredibly fun to write and I've never gotten so much amazing feedback from a fandom before, so thank you again for giving this story a chance and sticking around.
Updates have been slow lately bc I'm back to uni (amount other things) but I'm constantly thinking about these boys <3 to everyone who's still here, hello, and I love you ;)
Special love to the lovely people at The Murder Boyfriends server and my incredible beta reader and partner in crime.

One Last Call

Chapter Summary

Nigel has work to do.

Chapter Notes

Just a quick announcement: the first 2 chapters of this story have been revised and edited by my lovely beta reader GrandMoffTisper. They're a lot better now!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Nigel heard the sound of the keys in the lock as he did every weeknight. He didn't bother to look up from his copy of Lord of the Flies to check the time, there was no need. He didn't even notice if maybe the process of getting the door open was taking Alex a bit longer than usual. The way he stumbled through the door with a disoriented look in his green eyes though, that wasn't what Nigel had been expecting to see at all. It took him almost exactly 2 seconds to toss the book aside and run towards Alex, just in time to catch him when he swayed forward.

Alex's body crashed against his with an unexpected force that took the breath out of him, but pretty quickly seemed to regain a little balance and he grabbed Nigel's arms in a tight grip, slowly starting to pull back from him.

"Alex? What happened?" Nigel asked hurriedly, trying to get him to meet his eyes, but he only found confusion in them. Alex was looking around the room with furrowed brows, his fingers still digging into Nigel's skin as he used him for support.

"Alex," he tried again after not receiving an answer. Fighting against the strong hold that was keeping his body in place, his hands moved to cup Alex's face, forcing him to look down, finally making eye contact. "What's the matter?" he asked, as gently as he could, forcing his voice to stay calm so as not to overwhelm him even more.

Alex closed his eyes tightly and shook his head a couple of times, his breathing slowly starting to even out from its erratic pace. Nigel watched him in silence, giving him time to calm down. A quiet moment passed and then he felt Alex's hands let go of him and shakily make their way up to rest over Nigel's on his face. They felt cold from

the night breeze outside and his knuckles were reddened. No, it wasn't just his skin that was red; there was blood on them.

Nigel's eyes widened at the sight, a flood of mixed emotions rushing through his brain and sending a shiver down his spine. Without saying another word, he guided Alex away from the door and begrudgingly let go of him to close it behind them.

"I'm fine," Alex mumbled, sounding anything but. Nigel walked him to the bathroom, and there helped him out of his vest and shirt, tossing them on the floor. He winced internally when what was probably his phone hit the tiles with a dry sound, muffled by the fabric of the vest.

The fact that he didn't have to ask Alex to stand still while he looked him over was evidence of how *not* fine he actually was.

He traced over the freckled skin of Alex's chest and abdomen with the tips of his fingers, not finding any visible harm. Alex shivered under his touch, the few, thin golden hairs on his torso raising in response. Nigel couldn't miss the way he winced when his hands touched his arms.

"Who did this to you?" Nigel asked with a frown, observing a set of angry red scratches he recognized as nail marks. "You fought with someone." The disdain was quickly building up inside him for whoever was guilty of such a crime.

Alex looked down to where Nigel had touched him, seeming more alert, but the confusion in his eyes was evident as he lifted his arm to take a closer look. Nigel waited as patiently as he could for him to finish his exploration, while taking note of the damage himself. Both of Alex's arms seemed to have been scratched furiously and there was some bruising starting to form on the inside of his forearms as well. That, along with the nearly dried blood on his knuckles, made a pretty clear picture of what had happened.

"Huh," Alex expressed eloquently. "I hadn't noticed."

He sounded like a small child, dumbly transfixed by the circumstances around him but completely unaware of their meaning. Nigel noticed that his hands were trembling slightly.

"Alex, what happened?" he tried again, and green eyes with expanded pupils turned their attention on him before answering.

"I think I lost my job."

That wasn't the answer he had been expecting. Losing his job couldn't be so bad, could it? They would take care of that later, he thought. In the meantime, he turned Alex around to face the sink, standing behind him, Alex's naked back pressing against the front of his cotton shirt, and they looked at each other through the mirror, their faces almost touching. He opened the faucet and took Alex's hands in his from behind, cold water running over their skin. The blood didn't come off easily; it wasn't much but it had been drying on his skin for a while. It wasn't the first time either of them had to watch the water turn red as they cleaned themselves, but he noted that it was the first time they had done so together.

At least it isn't Alex's blood , Nigel thought, grateful. *At least I wasn't the one to cause it* , his treacherous mind added.

Other people's blood, that was alright; it wasn't anything he couldn't deal with. It was necessary sometimes, fun, some others. He didn't know which one it had been this time, but he would find out.

He got Alex to lay beside him in bed; he was sweaty and still wearing his shoes, but it was time to change the sheets anyway and they'd both slept in worse conditions before.

"Are you going to tell me who hurt you, Alex?" Nigel inquired once again, when he had positioned himself over him, propped up on his left arm and combing through Alex's ginger hair which, in the dimly lit room, looked almost chestnut.

"No one hurt me," he argued, keeping his eyes shut.

"Fine, who did *you* hurt, then?"

He saw Alex tense as soon as the question left his lips and he waited for the answer, listening to the changing rhythm of his breathing. A moment later he opened his eyes and asked quietly, "You remember that guy from yesterday? The one that got in our way right before we left the bar?"

"Vaguely."

"Well," Alex began, shifting to lay on his side facing Nigel. "He was talking shit and I didn't like it."

"And so you punched him?" He laughed in disbelief. "Oh, Alex, I knew you still had it in you."

"What's that supposed to mean?" His offended expression was extremely adorable, in Nigel's opinion.

"It's been so long since you've done something like that. Didn't you miss it?" Nigel laid all the way down next to him, so they were face to face, whispering at each other like school girls at a sleepover. Alex seemed to consider it for a moment, his hand coming to grab Nigel's wrist where he had moved to cradle the back of Alex's head.

"He deserved it." It wasn't the answer he'd been expecting, but it was enough.

"And what words did he say to earn the gift of your violence?" The question came out in a rough voice and, by the enthralled look on Alex's face, it seemed to be having the desired effect.

Excitement bloomed in his chest.

What could have possibly set off Alex's volatile temper? Had the man insulted his pride? Had he stolen from him or questioned his most deeply ingrained beliefs? What could've been the one thing that finally got Alex to show his fangs?

"He had a problem with us." The admission came out angry, a dangerous quality to his voice. "He didn't like what we do with our lives, what we do together."

Silence took over once more and Nigel could feel his own heartbeat accelerating, echoing in his ears. Was that really it? Was that what it took to turn his Jack back to violence after months of fighting against it?

"Tell me what you did to him." He was in a trance, staring into Alex's eyes, idly caressing the skin of his neck with his thumb.

"I'm not sure what happened, exactly. All I know is one minute Enzo was talking and the next I was on top of him and just beating that bastard senseless," Alex said, a tinge of pride in his words.

Each second he became more excited, more eager for answers. "How did it feel?" he asked, breathlessly.

"I was angry." Alex let go of his wrist, and he almost wept for the loss. He watched him search for something in his pants' pocket. "I hit him with this too." He held his lighter between them and Nigel took it from him with a soft move of his hand. In the dark, the mostly red

metal made it difficult to distinguish, but he could see the tiny smears of blood on it.

He couldn't help but laugh.

"Someone said something about us, and you were so angry you hit him with your lighter? A lighter you don't let *me* touch? You got it dirty with someone else's blood?" It came out as a question, but this time he wasn't asking.

"Yes," was Alex's quiet answer. His eyes were wide and fixated on Nigel's.

"Tell me, *Jack* ," he insisted, the name making Alex gasp. "How did it feel?"

"It felt good."

One of Alex's thighs had slid up between Nigel's legs, and the hand that wasn't being used as a pillow under his head had moved to rest over Nigel's heart. There was no way Alex couldn't feel what his words were doing to him; the hammering heartbeat was loud in his own ears, but that was alright, it had never been a secret. In his eyes he could see that Alex was just as affected as he was. In that moment he understood that the shaking of Alex’s hands wasn't from fear or discomfort, but from excitement.

"Did you enjoy making him bleed?"

"Yes," Alex croaked out.

"Oh, Jack," he purred with a smile, inching closer to him.

"Fuck," Alex cursed and in a second he was all over him, lips on lips, teeth biting, and bruising hands on his sides.

"How I wish I could've seen you," Nigel said between frenetic kisses. He could picture it, the blood on his hands, the sweet, sweet anger on his face. It was a delightful thing to imagine. "Were you good for me, Jack?"

"Fuck, Nigel." In a confusing mix of sensations he felt Alex's warm hands making their way under his shirt as his mouth left deliciously painful bites on his neck. "Yes," he answered.

"Next time," he breathed out, starting to unbuckle Alex's belt,

struggling to keep his hands from fumbling in his rush. "Next time I'll do it for you, Jack. You won't have to get your hands dirty, I can do it for you." He tossed the belt behind him; the light metal of the buckle hit the floor with a clank.

Suddenly, Nigel was reminded of the fact that Alex was physically stronger than him, as he pushed him on his back against the bed, straddling him with his legs.

"What if I like getting dirty?" he teased, with a devilish grin.

And just like that, Nigel had managed to unleash the beast once more.

They were both lying in bed naked when Nigel's brain eventually processed the events of the day. Alex was on the verge of falling asleep by his side, lying on his stomach with his face turned to him and his eyes closed. He had a pillow under his head and his arms burrowed under it.

Nigel stared at him in silence, as he often did when Alex slept. His long lashes fluttering, like an angel fallen from grace, no longer holy but eternally beautiful. What a sinful sight he made. He listened to his breathing, calm and steady, his body completely relaxed. But what told him that Alex was finally asleep was the single sentence that came out of his mouth in a slow whisper.

"I love you."

Nigel's heart skipped a beat. Those three words he hadn't heard again in their waking hours, the ones that only left Alex's lips when he was too tired to help it or when he thought Nigel was going to die, an occurrence that hadn't taken place again since they'd left Scotland. He had other ways to say it, and Nigel was more than happy to accept them all. If anything, the faltering pattern of his own breathing told him exactly why it was best if Alex kept those words to himself.

But even in his fear, Nigel leaned closer to him, hiding his face in his lover's soft hair, kissed his forehead and, without thinking, he murmured back, "I love you too, Jack."

It had been the right thing to say, he was sure, but it was still so extremely frightening. His ears were ringing, the rush of his blood a loud whistle that wouldn't shut up. In a second his hands started to shake, the tremors he had almost forgotten about coming back in full

force.

In a rush, he left Alex's side, jumped out of bed and, not bothering to put on any clothes, he ran for the bathroom and locked himself in it. His back hit the door with a thud, his hands were cold when he hid his face in them. Sliding down, he sat on the cold, white, tiled floor. Why was it so hard? Why did he feel like he couldn't breathe? His chest hurt and his ribs were threatening to crush his lungs as the tightness grew stronger and almost unbearable. It was alright to love Alex, it was perfectly acceptable to love his Jack. Was it not? There was a voice inside his head that wouldn't stop telling him he was wrong.

Only death is certain, only by dying can one reach eternity. Love is ephemeral, hopelessly short-lived. Alex couldn't promise him eternity as long as they were both alive. And that was an even more terrifying thought. Nigel was fine with dying, even if he had gotten used to being alive. But losing Alex, continuing to breathe for a minute longer than him, that was not a possibility he could conceive. And yet, it could happen; Alex could die without him or he could leave, just like everyone did.

He sobbed in silence, hugging his legs and muffling the sound of his cries on his bony knees. He didn't want to wake Alex, he was probably tired and seeing him like this would only upset him; there was no need to give him another reason to walk away. He had a passing thought that he probably shouldn't be sitting on the floor as he was, but there were few things he cared about less in that moment, anyway.

He wasn't sure how long he was there by himself, digging his nails into the skin of his shoulders and crying himself into dehydration, but by the time he had gathered the strength to stand up, his limbs and back ached terribly.

Alex was still asleep when he went back to bed, like nothing had happened and, in a way, it hadn't. He snuggled in close, listening to the sound of his breathing and wished that he could get to keep him, that he could get to love him.

Nigel loved the apartment they were living in. It was spacious and the light streamed through the tall windows, making everything look clean and peaceful. But one of the things he loved the most about it was that, along with the rest of the furniture, it had come with a large,

reddish-brown grand piano that took up almost half of the living room. The first thing he'd done when they first stepped in the apartment had been opening the fallboard and pressing on the keys, like a child would the first time they see a piano. It had been so long since he'd had the chance to play one that it might as well have been his first time all over again. Some of the strings and hammers had been a little worse for wear, but nothing he couldn't fix, and the casing and lid were perfectly preserved.

Now he sat down on the bench in front of it, the beginning of Chopin's Nocturne in G major filling the room. It was always the hardest part to get right, but he'd played it so many times that he'd mastered it entirely by now. Still, it had taken him an embarrassing amount of time to get used to playing a piano again, since the last time he'd done it he'd been around 15 years old. This Nocturne was his mother's favorite piece, and he used to play it when she was sad, like whenever she and John fought a little too hard and she came to his room with tears in her eyes, or when John left for days and would leave her behind, or the night his grandmother passed away. He never knew what to say; she usually filled the silence for him, told him all about her feelings, so much so that sometimes he felt that she was telling him things he wasn't supposed to know. Conversations with his mother had always been very *intimate*. He'd learned to use that information in his favor, eventually, of course. But whenever she was too choked up on emotions to speak, he would play the piano for her.

The music was soothing; he didn't have to think about anything else, no words needed to be said if he just sat down to play, the piano would speak for him and not many people spoke its language. The music was honest, sincere, but not transparent, so it was safe.

He heard the door to the bathroom opening as Alex left the shower and then shortly after he felt him standing behind him. His hands stilled.

"Don't stop," Alex said. "I like seeing you play."

"You mean *hearing* ," he corrected, resuming his movements. It was hard to take up the tempo again after a pause, but he knew that Alex couldn't tell the difference.

"I know what I said." Nigel felt him put his hand on the back of his neck, possessive and controlling, but gentle and kind.

Standing so close, he could feel the warmth of his skin. Alex loved

taking hot showers no matter the weather, so whenever he sat next to Nigel the contrast between their temperatures was even more evident. He had a sweet, artificial aroma on him that Nigel couldn't identify, a great improvement from the cigarettes and whiskey he had come home smelling of.

Nigel played the rest of the song as best as he could, although his hands were still tired from trembling and he hadn't slept much. He didn't think Alex noticed any of those things. He hoped he wouldn't. When he was done, Alex sat next to him and he noticed that he was wearing jeans and a white t-shirt.

"Are you going somewhere?" he asked, turning to face Alex.

"I figured I should probably go find a job." He raised his left hand and put his phone on the lid of the piano. "Alicia called," he sighed. "She heard what happened last night and although she had some strong words to say about Lorenzo, she thinks that what I did was too *violent* and *impulsive* to let it slide. Apparently she convinced him not to take any legal measures."

"Did she fire you?"

"Not exactly." At Nigel's questioning look he clarified. "She says that we can't keep working together, so only one of us can stay, but she's not going to decide which one. So, instead, we're supposed to figure it out ourselves or let the rest vote on which one keeps the job." He rolled his eyes. "Because of course she doesn't want to be the one to choose between the homophobe or the one that beat him up. Her moral compass must be spinning like crazy."

Nigel frowned, "So you are giving up then?" he asked, not understanding what Alex was trying to say.

"They're not going to choose me over him, Nigel. They have known Enzo for longer and he's the one putting ice on his face as we speak, not me." He shook his head. "I don't want their sympathy, anyway."

"Do you think they would all be on his side, even Lisa?"

Alex seemed to mull it over, his eyes looking down somewhere to Nigel's left. His lips pursed in a thin line before he answered, "I don't know, we haven't talked after last night. And she's just one person. Everyone's going to have a say in it, including people I've barely talked to before, like the guy that taught me to make cocktails who hates me because I spilled vodka on him and the girl in the kitchen

who I've heard complaining that those girls from that Russian music duo are gross for being gay." He huffed, "I reckon she'd want me as far away from her as possible once they tell her what happened. She probably thinks that I should go to hell." As an afterthought he added, "Like those ladies at the church said."

Nigel saw the moment he tensed up. He could be so susceptible to those things sometimes, Alex.

"Do you think we will go to hell?" The question was a sudden shift in subject, he was aware, but the way Alex's eyes widened when they met his told him it had been worth it.

"For being gay?" He laughed and rolled his eyes for the second time that morning. "I think that, with our record, that's the least of our concerns."

Nigel smiled then, amused by the statement. Certainly he had to be joking. Wasn't he? He could feel their thighs touching just barely, the bench was wide and they were both slim, but Alex had been inching closer by the second and now their shoulders were touching as well.

"I don't know what sins you think we have committed," he began. "Isn't it all a part of God's plan, after all?"

"I don't know if that's how it works," he said, but Nigel could see the truth behind the facade. He was grinning and there was a glimmer in his eyes, the way it had been when he'd learned of his destiny, when Nigel had called him Jack for the first time.

"We are doing exactly what we're supposed to, didn't you tell me that yourself?" he insisted.

Alex had to know, he had been the one to assure Nigel of the legitimacy of their choices, that they were on the right path, that Nigel hadn't deviated from his cause when he'd chosen to live.

"I did," Alex answered after a bit. He seemed pleased with him, for some reason he wasn't sure of. Like Nigel had accomplished some task he wasn't aware of having accepted in the first place. "And I'm glad that you remember." With a small smile, he turned fully towards him and left a chaste kiss on his lips, so quick that Nigel didn't have time to reciprocate it. "In any case, that means I don't have to worry about any of this. It doesn't matter if I lose my job at the bar, I'll figure something else out. I always do," he concluded, taking his cell phone again and standing up.

He left the apartment shortly after that and Nigel had the sudden realization that it was a Sunday and the chances of finding a job that day were extremely low, something that Alex knew very well. He wasn't worried, he could understand him needing his space. He only wished he hadn't picked the only day they had together to instead go take a pointless walk and probably poison his body with nicotine.

No matter, Nigel already knew how to fix it.

Nigel spent the next few days doing two things he was extremely good at: watching and learning. On Tuesday morning he left Alex sleeping and told him he was heading to work, but instead he went to Alicia's. At that time of the day there wasn't anyone who would recognize him; Lisa rarely went in so early and aside from her, only this Enzo guy had seen him and there were no chances of running into him as the staff had yet to make up their mind on who would be staying.

He found the bar nearly empty. They served food, so there *were* some patrons aside from him, but the staff was unfocused and obviously bored. Last time he'd been here he'd taken notice of every detail he could lay eyes on: a chart with the staff's names was at the back, with a basic description and their full names on display. He spotted what he was looking for immediately.

Lorenzo Estrada Rodríguez, it said under the picture of the man he remembered seeing on Friday. Brown eyes with long lashes and dark thin hair. He was attractive, Nigel thought, with a certain air of superiority in his eyes, but he could see the word *douchebag* written all over his face. It didn't matter, he had what he'd gone looking for.

Finding where he lived was easier than he'd thought it would be. Enzo had an apartment in his name, and the address in the phone book told him exactly where to go. The place looked expensive; it was a recently built, modern style apartment building with wide windows and big balconies. It wasn't to Nigel's taste at all; he considered it to be a poor companion for the historical buildings around it, an offense to the 13th and 14th century architects. It was perfect for Lorenzo.

For a week, he changed his routine walk home from work to take a short bus trip to Enzo's place, where he would just loiter around, waiting to see him. A few times he saw him leave with the same girl. She was absolutely beautiful, tall and thin like a model, with long, wavy, brunette hair, although she had obviously been cursed with terrible taste if she was dating him. Nigel saw her in some of the

pictures Enzo had posted on Facebook, where he seemed to be unable to stop sharing absolutely everything that happened in his life– except for the bad parts, since there was no record of him getting his ass kicked by Alex anywhere on his wall. Nigel had enjoyed seeing his bruised face grimacing every time he tried to smile, accidentally pulling at the nerves on his split lip. It was wonderful, what his Jack had done to him.

On day five of his personal investigation, Nigel got a chance to sneak into the apartment. Enzo had invited some friends over but he wasn't going to be home when they arrived, so he left the keys under a pot next to the door, ignorant of the fact that Nigel had been listening to his phone call from just a few meters away, around the corner in the hallway. He didn't know how much time he had, so he didn't waste it. The place was as awfully decorated as he'd expected, but there was a surprising amount of family pictures on every possible surface. Nigel recognized his brothers from his profile, he was the youngest of three, and in some of the pictures he saw who he assumed were his parents. While rummaging through Enzo's shelves in the living room, an intermittent yellow light caught his attention. Next to the TV, the landline phone was beeping with an unheard message, he stood next to it and pressed play and the voice of an older man filled the room.

"Lorenzo, hijo, necesito que me llames de vuelta. El hijo de un amigo va a estar por Granada y pensé que podías darle un recorrido por la Universidad como tú la conoces bien. Va a estudiar allí el próximo año, así que se van a ver a menudo. Me dices qué piensas."

Nigel's Spanish wasn't as good as his French, but he had picked up enough from living there and his Latin studies to understand what the man had said. He seemed to be Enzo's father, if the word "son" wasn't being used simply as a term of endearment. He wanted him to give some other guy a tour around the university where, apparently, Enzo was a student as well. But that couldn't be right. In all his research on Enzo he hadn't seen anything about him going to school anywhere. Intrigued, he took a pen from a shelf and wrote down on his wrist the number that appeared on the screen of the phone. The area code was from Madrid, starting with 81, just like his and Alex's had during the short time they had lived in the city. He didn't stay long after that.

That night, when Alex went out for a smoke, Nigel sat down with his laptop, the website for the University of Granada was already open on the browser. He found the contact number they listed for information and the next morning he called. After several minutes being passed from one operator to the next, someone finally answered him.

"Good morning, my name is John Forbes and I recently applied for a course at your university but I've been told that for some reason my information has gotten mixed with another student's. I was hoping you could help me with that?"

"Of course," a lady with a marked accent replied. *"can you tell me the other student's name please?"*

"His name is Lorenzo Estrada Rodríguez."

He heard clicking sounds on the other side of the line and then she spoke again, a note of confusion in her voice. *"I'm sorry, but we don't have anyone with that name studying here at the moment."*

"Are you sure?" He asked, faking as much surprise as he could. "Hasn't there been anyone with that name at all, ever?"

"Well ," the lady replied, more clicking sounds following. *"There was one student with that name, but he was only here for a semester and he didn't show up again after that."*

"How long ago was that?"

"About 2 years."

Nigel couldn't help the smile that formed on his lips. That was it, that was exactly what he needed.

"Can you tell me your name again?" she said after being met with silence. *"I can search your information instead, maybe we can sort out the confusion from there-"*

"No, there's no need," he cut her off. "You've been extremely helpful, thank you. Have a good day." He hung up, not letting her say another word.

He didn't need much more information after that, but he continued his search, just to be sure. He found the contact number of the owner of the building where Enzo lived and called, pretending to be interested in buying the apartment above his. The man who answered was chatty and answered most of his questions without too much pressing. He told him that Enzo's apartment had been originally purchased by one Alonzo Estrada, and searching that name sent Nigel to an article about art traders in Spain and the man in the picture looked just like the one he'd seen at the apartment. Many things started connecting in his head after that. Alonzo had paid for his son's education and the apartment

he was living in. The last time Enzo had posted a picture of them together had been in March 2007, when his family went on a vacation in Mallorca, and they hadn't seen each other for at least a year before that. It didn't seem that Alonzo had ever visited him in Granada.

Nigel made himself some tea, putting as much honey in it as he could without completely turning it to syrup, and sat down to have breakfast. Alex was still asleep, his body used to going to bed at 3:00 AM and waking up at noon. Nigel still had some time before he had to leave for work at the pharmacy, so he took his time to think things through.

At some point Enzo had enrolled at the university, but shortly after that he'd dropped out for some reason. He had been working up until he'd gotten on Alex's bad side, so he obviously needed the money, but his father was still financially supporting him and had no idea that his son was a dropout. Perhaps it had been the motorcycle he drove around on, or the expensive gifts he bought for his girlfriend with a keen fashion sense, but Enzo needed his rich father's money and he was lying to him to keep getting it. That was Nigel's final conclusion.

Finishing up his toast and his tea, he opened the notebook Imogen had given him and found the number he'd written down.

He had one last call to make.

Chapter End Notes

> In case you might be interested, here's a link to Nigel's iPod playlist created by GrandMoffTisper, from which I got the inspiration for the addition of Chopin's Nocturne in this chapter since it's our headcanon that he would listen to that sort of stuff. He doesn't have an iPop in this because I hate apple with all my being but you can imagine he does.

¿Quién me ha robado el mes de abril?

Chapter Summary

It's Alex's birthday and he has some conflicting emotions about it

Chapter Notes

So originally I wanted to have this ready for April 4 but as you can see that wasn't the case since it's *checks calendar* umm April 19, oops?

CW: the usual hint of religious trauma, discussion of the death of a parent

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Alex had been about to take a job as a waiter when he was told he could go back to working at Alicia's. He stared at the phone in his hand like it was from another planet, his brain having a hard time processing the conversation he'd just had with his boss.

Out on the balcony, Nigel was selectively cutting leaves off of a plant Alex didn't recognize.

"Alicia just called. Enzo left the city, so the moral dilemma is resolved since I am the only one available now."

Nigel remained focused on his task when he replied. "Did he?" It might've been his imagination, but Alex thought that he sounded suspiciously amused.

"Apparently he had some family drama or something. His apartment is for sale now." He watched Nigel, expecting a reaction but saw none.

"Alicia told you all that?"

"No, Lisa texted to tell me." There were so many better things to ask, in his opinion. "They want me back on Monday."

The sun was setting outside, the sky a warm orange with deep purples and blues, and there wasn't a cloud in sight. The lighting made Nigel's shadow seem a lot larger, stretched out on the tiles and almost touching Alex's feet.

"How convenient for you."

"Funny, I thought the same thing." Every single one of Nigel's answers fed his suspicion. With Enzo out of the equation he could get his job back and no one would be forced to vote for either one of them. He hadn't been looking forward to knowing exactly how many of his co-workers hated him, even if by some miracle he ended up winning. All of that was gone now though, and it *was* a little too convenient.

Not being able to hold back, he asked what he'd been wondering since he got the call. "You didn't have anything to do with that, did you?"

Nigel turned his head slowly towards him, the shadows hid part of his face while the last rays of sun gave his skin a rosy blush. The blue in his eyes looked dark and deep and there was an unmistakable grin on his face.

What a beautiful little nightmare .

"You did," Alex concluded in disbelief. "How?" A million thoughts occurred to him, so many different possibilities. What could he have done to make Enzo go away? And most importantly, why did he even go through the trouble?

"Everyone has secrets, Alex. You just have to know how to use them," he said, sounding very satisfied with himself. It didn't feel like Nigel had answered the question at all, and at the same time, he'd gotten all that he needed to know.

"You calculating bastard." The offense came to him naturally and he was surprised to find that he was smiling as the words left his lips. "You got rid of Enzo."

They were facing each other properly now, Nigel had turned on his bench to look at him, his hands on his knees, porcelain white skin a stark contrast to the black of the denim pants he had worn to work. Despite the smile on his face, Alex could tell he was holding back from enjoying his little victory. His shoulders tensed up and the way his legs were firmly held in place by the tight grip of his hands was very telling.

"He was getting in the way."

Without entirely intending to, Alex walked the short distance between them until he was standing right in front of him.

Looking down at Nigel, he spoke in a smooth voice. "I didn't ask you to do anything."

It was a risky thing to say and Nigel reacted just as expected, his grin faltering just slightly, still looking like he was trying to stay very still. He had his head tilted back to look up at Alex with wide eyes and parted lips.

"You never ask, but I always know what you want."

"Do you, now? You did it for me, then?"

"That is my purpose, Alex. Aren't you pleased with what I've done?"

What a question to ask him. *Was* he pleased? On one hand, Nigel going behind his back to do his dirty work for him felt wrong on so many levels. It was treacherous and reckless. He would have dealt with Enzo if he'd wanted; Nigel didn't have to make that choice for him, and he didn't have to go out of his way to save him like a damsel in distress. He should've been furious, should've yelled at Nigel for it, demanded he explain how he'd done it to make sure they were still safe, that no one would be coming back to hunt them in retaliation. He *was* a little angry, deep down. But the Alex that jumped down Nigel's throat whenever he did something without his permission had died a long time ago. The Alex that was standing on that balcony now, staring down into Nigel's glassy eyes, mesmerized by the amazing creature that he was, *that* Alex couldn't help but be absolutely delighted.

"I got my job back," he said, his hands slowly coming up to cup Nigel's face. He was surprised to find his skin warmer than usual, especially where his thumbs touched his cheeks. "I don't know what you did, but that bastard is out of our lives and I don't have to worry about changing my schedule now that I was just about to start school." He traced the curve under Nigel's eyes and they fluttered shut, his long, dark lashes falling over his cheekbones beautifully. God, was he pretty. "And you did that."

"For you," Nigel said hoarsely, his voice sending sweet vibrations through Alex's hands.

"For *us* ."

He opened his eyes at that. "For us," he repeated.

Alex wasn't one to say 'thank you' that often, but he thought that the

way Nigel's shoulders visibly relaxed was enough confirmation that he didn't need to.

Eerily, he thought he could feel the lifeless stare of a raven from the living room.

Going back to work consisted of an unavoidable streak of awkward interactions. The staff was reluctant to talk to him, and he knew he was on thin ice with Alicia. There was also the fact that everyone knew about him and Nigel now and the thought alone made him want to scream, leave through the door without a word and never come back.

Lisa had continued to treat him the same way as ever, at least, and Mateo, well, he'd never been one to talk much anyway. He got used to the new situation pretty quickly; by the end of the week it felt like nothing had ever happened. Alicia hired a new employee to replace Enzo and that drew attention away from Alex until everyone had seemingly forgotten about the incident.

He didn't stay for drinks after his shift any more after that. No one told him he wasn't allowed to, of course, but he could read between the lines when they didn't ask him to stick around. It was for the best, really. Every time he saw the chairs pulled up before he went home, he could feel the rage making his blood boil. He would see Enzo's bloody face in front of him, would remember how he'd felt like he could've just killed him if Mateo hadn't separated them.

"You weren't going to kill him, Alan," Lisa had told him once, rolling her eyes at him like it was the stupidest thing she'd heard, as he lit up her cigarette with the same lighter he'd used to beat up the guy..

"I'm not so sure about that."

You don't know how much I wanted to, he thought it best not to add.

In the third week of September, Alex became an official student at the University of Granada under the name *Alan Hunter.* The change in routine was difficult to get used to at first. Sundays with Nigel had to be sacrificed in order to get more hours at Alicia's, since he couldn't keep his previous schedule and go to class first thing in the morning. It had been an *adjustment,* to say the least, but at the end of the day, it had been worth it. If someone would've told 17 year old Alex that

three years later he would be so excited to re-enter an academic setting, he would've spit in their face. And yet, he was. He realized that most things he'd hated about school and that he'd thought were an inherent part of the experience, were in fact not at all the case at university. Where previously he had been chastised for asking too many questions, now he was encouraged to challenge his professors. In fact, the more controversial his questions were, the happier they seemed to have him in class. At 17, he had spent hours hidden from his father and anyone else who could stop him, reading forbidden books, uncensored editions, seeking the truth he had been warned against. But now the books were directly recommended to him; he could simply go to the library and take 5 of them at a time and if someone saw him he would only be praised for his commitment. He wasn't the only one enjoying this newfound freedom; sometimes when he came back from work he would find one of the books on Nigel's side of the bed instead of his, or sitting on the kitchen counter or the coffee table on the balcony instead of wherever he'd left it.

Alex also had a significant advantage over most of his classmates. He couldn't exactly put it in his application, but he *had* been one of the best students in Britain after all. No one was on his level in knowledge or passion, and his professors could tell. By the time the first round of exams came and went he had kept his impeccable grades in what his classmates called a perfect streak, but which he knew was just his personal average. Everyone was impressed, not just the professors. He used to think that he, Josh and Raj were compatible, that they understood him at some level. They were both brilliant, that was certain; Raj had probably gone on to study at some prestigious university after he graduated and Josh had shared his same curiosity about the world. However, in the 4 months since he'd enrolled, Alex had met so many interesting and complicated people who, even when they knew nothing about him, were still capable of recognizing his potential. The professors were ruthless when grading and his classmates were competitive and while some might've found that environment hostile, he had never felt so welcomed and at peace.

He was thriving, both socially and academically, and that's the reason he couldn't understand why he felt that something was missing. After the first wave of excitement wore off, every single one of his accomplishments only felt like one less thing to worry about, something else he got to scratch off of his to-do list. No amount of praise was enough to leave him satisfied. *"I expect great things from you, Alan"* , his Geography professor had said. *"An extraordinary student"* , he'd been called in Medieval Art. *"You're a brilliant young man with a fascinating mind"* , he'd been told by his Philosophy professor.

It was still not enough.

He was excelling at everything he'd set himself to do, people adored him, and the ones that didn't envied him. So why couldn't he be proud?

He found his answers when April rolled around.

The orange trees were starting to turn white with blossoms and the smell of jasmine flooded the streets at dawn. It was to that smell that he awoke on the morning of April 4. It was a Saturday and he was alone in bed. He blinked awake lazily, pushing long hair out of his eyes, where it had fallen in his sleep. " *It's temporary*" , he'd told Nigel, when he'd refused to get a proper haircut some months ago. Now it had grown longer than ever in soft waves that fell just a few centimeters short from reaching his shoulders.

He rolled on his back and stared at the ceiling for far longer than any sane person would. Nigel was at work, as he'd been asked by his boss the night before to help out with the inventory first thing in the morning. Alex had known that would be the case, he'd been there when Nigel took the call but he couldn't help being disappointed anyway.

The sweet smell of jasmine persisted and for a minute he thought that maybe it was a lingering effect of a dream he couldn't properly remember. That was, until he turned his head and saw small white tubular petals on the gray sheets. With a frown, he reached out to touch the small flower, still half convinced that it was all in his head. It was soft when he held it, fresh, like it had just been cut from the stem. The smell was almost dizzying when he put it to his nose. Nigel didn't have any jasmine in his little "garden", at least not that he remembered, and it seemed unlikely that it would have blown through the window. And yet, there it was.

When he got out of bed he left the flower on the pillow, where dreams belonged. In 20 years he hadn't had a normal day, and it seemed this wasn't going to be the exception. That thought gave Alex pause. Standing in the kitchen, pouring himself some coffee, he realized that on that day, April 4th of 2009, he was turning exactly 20 years old. He stared at the mug in his hands as he sat down in one of the kitchen stools, and allowed the warmth of the ceramic to fully wake him.

It was his birthday. What a strange concept.

He'd never liked celebrating his birthday. Well, maybe *never* wasn't the

right word. He'd been happy to receive gifts and be pampered by distant relatives when he had been 5 years old. Of course, by that age he still wasn't aware of what else had happened on the day of his birth. Sure, he had always known that there was some correlation between that and his mother's passing. He'd been given a very sentimental and spiritual explanation for it, actually. *"Your mother loved you very much, Alex,"* they would say. *"She had to leave so you could stay with your dad. But she's always with you."* And when he'd asked why, they'd said, *"Because God needed her in heaven. She's an angel now and she's watching over you."* It had been enough, for a while. But then he'd gotten older and he'd realized that most kids had a mother, because in his childish mind he had assumed that every mother in the world had to *leave* for their children to be born. His grandma didn't count, she was a grandmother, not a mother, and neither did his aunt, again, she was just an aunt. It had been a stupid child's logic. Eventually, he connected the dots and he'd realized that his mother had died, not because she had chosen to, or because she had sacrificed herself for him, but because the doctors hadn't noticed in time that she was bleeding out. There wasn't anything beautiful about that, nothing heroic, there was no love involved, just bad luck.

He was never able to enjoy his birthday after that, not when he finally understood why his father always disappeared for a few hours on April 4, why he always came back looking tired with red rimmed eyes. Alex had learned pretty early in his life that he was a product of grief that had been given to his father as a gift he didn't know what to do with.

As he was lost in his thoughts, a ping came from his laptop and he looked at where it sat on the table in the living room. He didn't remember leaving it on, but sometimes Nigel would borrow it – without asking– and leave it charging afterwards or just forget to turn it off. Alex stood up to check what the sound had been, hoping that it was an email from his Social History professor with the grade of his last paper. What he saw instead made something flip in his chest. It was an email, yes, but from the Google alert he'd set for his and Nigel's names. He hadn't received a notification in *months* , it had been quiet for the past year in general. Just imagining why someone was talking about them again made something cold and familiar sink in the pit of his stomach.

Whatever he had been expecting, it wasn't what he saw. A newspaper had posted an article at 6:00 AM on that very same day featuring the name "Alex Forbes". It was an obituary.

Alex sat down on the couch, not taking his eyes off the screen, staring perplexed at his picture and the text below it. His date of birth, general background information and the last place he had been seen along with a personal note, written by none other than Dr. Ian Forbes. He couldn't read it, not when he was still alive but was being spoken about as if he weren't. Not when, at the end of the note, it was said that his father had a headstone with his name placed next to his mother's. *"So that they may be together until I join them, wherever they are,"* the newspaper quoted.

It made him feel sick.

He sat there for some time, overwhelmed, thinking about how his father, the bastard, had decided to declare him dead to the world on the day of his birthday. What had he said not two years ago? What was all that talk about not giving up? About how he would never stop looking for his son? Well, his son was right there, in an apartment in Granada and very much alive, and he'd decided to pay someone to carve his name into stone and put it on an empty grave anyway. Alex closed the laptop a bit more harshly than he probably should have and stood up from the couch, marching towards the bedroom.

They hadn't taken much with them when they left Yorkshire, and most of what they did take had been for practical purposes. In their rush there hadn't been much room for sentimentality. Still, there were some things that couldn't stay behind or be destroyed. Nigel's book and his most precious *pets* had come with them from England to Scotland, and then a couple new members had joined them on the trip to Spain. Of the two of them Nigel was definitely the one with more physical attachments, and he had more appreciation for privacy and having his own space. As a general rule, there were few things Alex ever felt the need to save for himself, but there was something he kept, hidden even from Nigel, that he couldn't ever let go of.

He stood in front of the nightstand on his side of the bed and opened the only drawer. At the bottom, under a notebook and a couple of pens he never used, he found a white envelope with golden floral patterns. There would never be a time when the sight of it wouldn't make his heart beat a tad faster. Each time he had to sit down on the bed to muster the strength to open it. The photos inside were always hard to look at, but he took them out, one by one to lay them next to him over the sheets.

"Marian Forbes, 1986" read the words on the back of his favorite photo of her. It must've been written sometime after, since she hadn't had

the misfortune of marrying his father until 1987 and back then she was still going by Marian *Harper* . In the photo, his mother was wearing a white sundress with short sleeves, and her wavy, ashy blonde hair framed her smiling face and fell over her shoulders down to her waist. It was the only picture he had of hers where she had long hair, in every other photo she had it up to her shoulders, as she had cut it for the wedding and had never let it grow much longer after that.

Alex couldn't stop looking at her. Once, someone who must've been very cruel told him that his father treated him the way he did, with coldness and detachment, because Alex reminded him too much of his dead wife. Looking at her now, he had to agree that they looked very similar. Green eyes with long lashes, the freckles covering his cheeks and nose and the shape of his lips had undeniably been inherited from her. She had been so beautiful, and his father had never talked about her, he had buried her in his memories and kept her all to himself. That's why Alex had to take the photos away from him right before leaving forever, since he clearly didn't deserve her.

He put the photos back in the envelope and intoin the drawer but couldn't stop thinking about his father, picturing him writing his heartfelt words for an obituary no one would read because nobody cared, and going as far as saying he would meet both Alex and his mother in the afterlife. What a joke. If they ever met again it would be in hell, and he was certain that his mother wouldn't be there.

That was enough, he decided, and put on some jeans and a t-shirt and left.

At first he didn't know where he was going, just that he needed to be outside, get some air and just *walk* . Eventually though, it was clear where he was heading. The dark doors of the church stood tall in front of him once again, mocking him as if daring him to come in. Some people were going in and out, but the place was almost empty and maybe that's what gave him the strength to finally cross the threshold. Stepping inside, he felt an instant shift in the air, as if it was thicker, harder to breathe, until the oppressiveness inside his chest became almost impossible to bear, but he continued to take heavy steps until he sat in one of the pews closer to the altar. He wondered if the discomfort was a simple psychosomatic reaction to a place that held so many memories for him, or if he should take it as a sign that he wasn't welcomed.

He sat with his elbows on his knees and ran hands through his hair

when it fell forward over his eyes. Two rows in front of him, someone stood from their seat, and he looked up at the sound of shoes walking past him to see a tall, slim man in a worn out suit leaving the church. He looked to be in his mid 40's with some silver strands in his light chestnut hair. Looking at him, Alex couldn't help thinking about himself. Would he make it to that age, someday? He was now exactly 20 years old and his father, the man who had raised him, had decided that he was dead, had chosen to stop looking for him thinking his life had been cut short by an unknown tragedy. Angrily, Alex stared ahead at the immense cross on the wall, his knuckles pulled tight over the denim of his jeans. Would his father not speak of him now that he had carved a headstone with his name? Would he refuse to speak of him the same way he had remained silent about his mother? Would he make everyone forget he ever existed in the first place and cut ties with anyone who still remembered, just like he had pushed away everyone from poor Marian's family?

"Are you here to beg for your soul, sinner?"

Alex startled only for a second before his mind recognized Nigel's voice from behind him.

"Do you mind the company?" Nigel asked, this time closer to his ear, almost whispering.

He shook his head, without turning, suddenly incapable of uttering a single word. Last time Nigel had approached him in a church, he'd walked away at the end, leaving Alex all alone with his thoughts. This time though, Nigel came to sit next to him and Alex watched him lean back to look up at the vaulted ceiling with a relaxed expression.

"How did you know I would be here?"

"I will always be able to find you, I thought you knew that by now." His eyes met Alex's then, and there was a smile on his face. "No," he shook his head, rolling his eyes, seemingly dismissing his own comment. "I just had a hunch."

"Don't you have work?"

"Come on, don't be harsh," he teased. "I asked to leave early since it was my boyfriend's birthday."

There was no time to examine that statement, as he stretched out his arm and opened his fist so Alex could see he was holding a small white flower in the palm of his hand. "I brought you a gift."

The sight of the jasmine flower caught him off guard. "Was it you then? You put it there this morning?" he half asked, half accused, taking the delicate flower from Nigel and holding it with care in his hand.

"What do you mean?" Nigel asked, seeming genuinely confused.

"Where did you find this?"

"The jasmine?" Nigel's eyes widened slightly. "You're joking. They're everywhere."

It might've been his imagination but at that moment he felt that the church fell silent. He looked down at the white petals, caressing them with his fingers.

"This morning when I woke up," he began to explain, "there was one just like this on your side of the bed." He offered the flower back to him. "I thought you might've left it there."

There was barely any contrast between the jasmine and Nigel's pale fingers when he took it from him. His hands were always so white and cold, like a corpse's.

"Royal jasmine, do you know what it means?"

"Purity." The answer came easily. He had learned about the language of flowers some time ago and Nigel owned entire books on the subject.

"Yes," he confirmed with a nod. "But also, eternal love and beauty." Nigel's eyes were gleaming the way they always did whenever he spoke of eternity and, ironically, death.

"Is that why you're giving it to me?" he tried to tease, but his heart wasn't in it. "Do you think I'm beautiful and eternal?"

"Beautiful? Yes." The way he said it with no hesitation almost made Alex regret having asked. "And eternal, well, it's love that's supposed to last forever, not the physical manifestation of your existence." His smile had slowly faded to a more pensive expression, his lips set in a flat line and eyes downcast, considering the flower in his hand. "So I suppose that yes, you would be eternal. Both of us would."

It was far too early to be considering the durability of his existence, even more so when it was linked to something so fragile as *love* . All he could do was nod and look down at the floor, feeling out of place

and slightly disoriented.

"I saw the alert." That made him look up again, but Nigel hadn't stopped staring at the jasmine. "I can see them on my phone, too."

Alex couldn't help but huff in response. "That bastard, couldn't wait to put me down, could he?" A lump formed on his throat and he tried to laugh it off, but it came out choked. "Did you know it's not even legal? Without real evidence they can't declare us dead before the seven year mark. Obviously he didn't care, he had to move on, live his life." He shook his head and added a bit more quietly but with just as much anger. "The *headmaster* doesn't have time to look for his only son. Better say he's dead."

He didn't know what he was saying or *why* he was saying it. Nigel turned to him with pursed lips and narrowed eyes.

"I thought you didn't want to be found."

"I don't!" he rushed to declare. "For fuck's sake, of course I don't want him to find me, to find us." It occurred to him that cursing in a church wasn't the most appropriate behavior, but that had never stopped him before.

"Then why are you so disappointed that he has stopped looking for you?"

"Because he doesn't get to just move on. He shouldn't be able to just suffer for two years and then be done with it. How can he just give up so easily?" He was getting worked up, he could tell. The same oppressiveness he'd felt walking in had made itself present once again, making it harder to breathe, like there was less oxygen. "But that's just the thing, he couldn't wait to get rid of me. I always knew that he hated me, he never wanted to be a father. Having a son? Yes, maybe he wanted a son, when his wife was going to take care of everything and he was only expected to put food on the table and tell me to work hard."

"But then of course, I was born and I took my mother from him and he never forgave me for that. He didn't say it, but he didn't have to, I always knew." Alarmed, he felt that his eyes were starting to sting and he tried to blink the tears away only to make them gather up even faster. But he couldn't stop. "Well, that was his bloody problem, wasn't it? It wasn't my fault, I didn't kill my mother, he did. I could've loved her so much better than he ever did, I know." A single tear finally fell and he quickly brushed it away with his hand that still smelled of

jasmine. He couldn't meet Nigel's eyes. "But now I'm cursed and he dared to put my headstone right next to hers so everyone can see that I was born on the same day she died, and for what? 17 years of a mediocre life? Locked away in a dorm room, studying and fooling around with a bunch of dickheads with nothing good in their brains. Everyone must think it was such a waste. He had no right."

The tears were coming freely now and to his annoyance, there wasn't anything he could do to stop it but shut his eyes and hope that the world would just go away, that the day would end and he could move forward. He almost jumped when he felt the touch of Nigel's hand on his leg. If he thought that cursing would be inappropriate, then two young men being so close to each other was probably worse. And yet, he didn't have the strength to reject the contact.

"I am sorry that the day of your birth causes you so much pain," his smooth voice purred. "But you must not forget that you were reborn on the day we became one, the day you accepted your destiny alongside me."

He opened his eyes and saw the blurry silhouette of the pew in front of them and then, looking downwards, Nigel's hand in a soft grip on his thigh.

"The version of you that was born on the fourth of April is no longer the one you are. You don't carry that burden anymore, your mother's death has no connection to the person you are now because you were born on the morning of November 16th." His grip on him tightened. "That life is over. You bear no fault, no blame. You are free."

And maybe that was the problem: his previous life was *over* , almost officially now. He had never missed it before and he certainly hadn't been happy in it. But now it was gone for good and that made something very cold and painful settle inside him.

"What are you even saying?" From the corner of his eye he saw Nigel flinch when he pulled away from him, losing contact in the process. "Why would you say that? You think that any of that matters?"

"I was merely trying to-"

"Well, don't," he cut him off, turning to look at him angrily and meeting Nigel's disgruntled expression. "I don't need your comfort, alright?" A final tear ran over his cheek, betraying his words. "I don't want to talk right now."

He felt Nigel's eyes on him when he looked away, trying to calm his breathing which had become slightly erratic. Finally looking around them he saw that they weren't alone, but most people seemed to be minding their own business and not paying attention to them. It was early, but the inside of the church looked dark, the light coming through the windows barely made a difference and the figures in the stained glass made him feel uncomfortable and observed. He had to leave.

"Let's just go, I'm tired," he said after a deep sigh and stood up, gesturing for Nigel to do so as well since he was closer to the aisle.

"Fine," came his resigned answer, and Alex could tell that he was upset.

Good, now we're both miserable . It was petty and unfair and not so deep down he knew that Nigel hadn't done anything wrong, not this time. But he was angry and Nigel was so good at taking his anger.

Just before he headed towards the door to leave, he looked at Nigel, who was walking in front of him, and noticed that his hands were empty. Out of curiosity he turned back and just as he'd guessed he would, he spotted the jasmine flower on the seat of the pew. It felt right somehow, to leave it there.

When they got home, no matter how much he looked, he couldn't find the one he'd seen that morning.

Chapter End Notes

As you might've noticed I referred to Dr. Forbes aka Alex's dad as "Ian" Forbes, now, if you're curious as to why you can check out this post by my wonderful beta reader where she explains why we think that's supposed to be his name, even though it's never mentioned in the movie.
Alex's mother's name "Marian Harper" was a total invention by us, it just made sense.

Chapter title it's from the song "Quién me ha robado el mes de abril" by Joaquín Sabina and it means "who's stolen April from me"

Again, thank you so much for all the support, hope you're still enjoying this story <3 and if you do please don't be shy and leave a comment, it's –without exaggerating– what makes me continue to write.

And bonfires lit up the shores

Chapter Summary

The boys go to the beach

Chapter Notes

CW for this chapter: non graphic descriptions of animal abuse and death of an animal (it's a crab, if that makes any difference to you)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They were outside of Lisa's place, a small, two-story white house that must've been last painted ten years ago, with pots on the orange windowsills and balconies. It was the first time Alex had actually stopped by, and he thought that it looked like a place Lisa would live. Colorful and warm but undeniably uncared for, neglected.

"Just don't crash it, alright?" she said, as she tossed him the keys of her gray sedan with such bad aim that Alex almost let them drop.

"I know how to drive," he argued, leaning down to grab the bag he'd left on the ground next to Nigel.

"You've had your license for less than a year."

He opened the car door, tossed the bag in the backseat, and turned back to Lisa with a grin. "And I still do it better than you."

She rolled her eyes at him, tucking her long curtain bangs behind her ear the way she always did whenever someone got on her nerves. Her hair was done up with a claw clip but a million red and orange strands were falling loosely over her pale shoulders, refusing to be controlled. She was in a dark red tank top, and Alex realized that he'd never seen her in anything but her uniform before. The sight of her fair skin, covered in tiny brown moles and freckles, was new and refreshing to him.

"Noah, listen to me." She drew Nigel closer with a hand on his shoulder, making him look at her. "If he *drowns,* " -she gave him an exaggerated wink-"you don't have to tell anyone. I'll be your alibi."

Nigel looked from her to Alex with a mischievous grin, like he was

genuinely considering murdering him and he couldn't wait to do it. Alex couldn't help the amused snort that came out of him.

"Don't give him any ideas, he might take you up on that." He patted Nigel on the shoulder and pulled him away from Lisa, guiding him to the passenger seat of the car.

"And I wouldn't blame him."

"We'll see you tonight, Lisa, bye." He waved at her dismissively, opening the door and sliding in behind the wheel. Nigel had already taken his place by his side. He would send Lisa a thank you text when they got to the coast, as she had been so kind to let them borrow her car for the trip. He turned the AC on and they headed to the coast of Almería.

The idea had come to Alex on an extremely warm afternoon in the last week of June. They had been coming out of a library, Alex's arms occupied with more books that he should have been carrying at once, when Nigel got distracted by a small souvenir store right outside. It was a tourist trap and he had fallen for it like a moth to a lightbulb. He just loved things, and Alex couldn't do anything but sigh in resignation and follow along. The visit had been quick and fortunately he didn't have to talk Nigel out of buying something pretty but ultimately useless. Instead, a postcard had caught his attention. It had a picture of a beach in Almería, taken right as the sun had begun to set and sky was as red and warm as the sand, a perfect contrast with the deep dark blue of the sea, and Nigel had looked at it like he wanted to teleport inside of it and merge with the landscape. So of course, Alex had promised to take him there as soon as summer break started and he had some time off.

Not twenty minutes into the ride Nigel was already fast asleep, head resting against the window and arms crossed over the seatbelt on his stomach. He looked completely relaxed with his rosy lips slightly parted and the slow rise and fall of his chest with every breath. The sight made Alex wish he didn't have to keep his eyes on the road, and he reached out to put his right hand on Nigel's thigh, almost without realizing he was doing it. He drove in relative silence, the radio turned down to almost a whisper serving as background noise to his thoughts. They arrived at the coast around nine, when the sun was still low on the horizon and the fresh breeze off the sea was a relief from the Spanish dry summer heat. Unfortunately, they had to walk for nearly fifteen minutes to find a quiet spot that wasn't absolutely crowded, since they hadn't been the only ones with the same idea.

In the end, they settled for a relatively empty side of the beach with more rocks than sand and where the food vendors weren't trying to sell anything to anyone. It was fine by them; they were there mostly for the change of scenery, not really for the social aspect of it. If anything, they were trying to avoid that. Nigel seemed to be happy enough with the choice, as he sat down on a patch of grass over the reddish sand, an impressively tall rock behind him protecting him from the sun. It was for the best. Had he chosen to sit anywhere else, he would be leaving the beach with his skin severely damaged, although Alex knew that no amount of shade or sunscreen would prevent the red blush that would tint his cheeks and nose by the end of the day.

Nigel was, at the moment, very much not concerned about any of these things. He looked around with calculating eyes, scanning the landscape around them. His face scrunched up in an adorable frown as he studied their surroundings.

"So, what's the verdict?" Alex said, standing in front of him with his hands on his waist. "Does it meet your expectations?"

Nigel didn't answer for a few seconds while he continued to look at anything but him, as if he was actually seriously considering what to say. "It will do, I suppose."

It will do . Alex had driven someone else's car for almost two hours to take him to the beach and all he could say was *"it will do"* .

He sighed, deciding not to take it personally. It was maybe one of those days, when Nigel was unnecessarily cryptic and gave only ambiguous answers. He didn't seem particularly unhappy though, and that would have to be enough.

"Alright, well, I'm going in, before the sun is too high to do anything." He removed his t-shirt and pants and left them next to Nigel where they would definitely get all sandy. But that was future Alex's problem. "Are you coming with?"

For the first time since they had gotten out of the car, Nigel looked at him, the wind blowing his disheveled dark hair into his eyes. He seemed to give some thought to the question before turning to open the bag beside him. "I will be staying here, if you don't mind."

"Are you joking? What's the point of coming all the way here if you're not getting in the water?" He watched him take out a green notebook and a pencil from one of the inner pockets and set it on his lap.

"It is more than enough for me to watch you enjoy yourself." He looked back at him with a small smile.

"Fine," he huffed, before shaking his head. "But it's your loss."

He turned his back on him and began walking towards the shore. The sand was rough and harsh on his feet but softer and lighter the closer he got to the edge of the water. Alex had learned to swim in a pool with an instructor somewhere around his fourth birthday, but he'd only really loved it the first time his father took him to the beach. The water hadn't been as blue and the sand had been a lot more gray, but as he felt the fresh touch of a small wave reaching his feet, he could swear he was reliving it all over again. He dove in. For a long moment the world became a lot quieter. There was nothing to hold him back, and both his body and his soul felt lighter. When he came up for air, he was surprised to find how much he'd missed the burn of salt water on his face.

Nigel was in almost the exact position he'd left him in, sitting cross legged and scribbling in his notebook. Alex approached him like a predator would to catch its prey off guard, in slow steps and with calculating eyes. He was absolutely engrossed in the pages, carrying the pencil across the paper in quick short strokes which made Alex realize that he was drawing. It was remarkable how even in the warm July summer, Nigel wouldn't sweat. His linen shirt, pink as the blush on his cheeks, looked impeccable and not even a slight sheen was visible on his face. It was absolutely ridiculous.

" *What* are you doing?" He stood a few steps from Nigel, feeling drops of water starting to run over his shoulder blades from where his hair touched the back of his neck. He didn't acknowledge the question as he continued to draw something Alex couldn't see. "Come on, show me that."

He attempted to take the notebook from Nigel, but he quickly drew back, closing it and putting it behind his back. "Stop it! You will ruin it," he grumbled.

"You have to be the most boring person in the world." Kneeling down in front of him, he ignored the rough grains of sand stinging his skin in favor of grabbing Nigel by the jaw and gently forcing him to meet his eyes. "Get in the water with me. You can draw all you want at home."

Nigel, with his cold eyes, long dark lashes, soft peony lips, and

porcelain pale skin. A true incarnation of the story of Snow White. A perverse mind behind the apparent innocence of his young face. He was far from boring. Alex firmly believed that he could spend the rest of his days trying to figure him out and he would only get a glimpse of the intricate design of his intellect. His thoughts, the logic behind his decisions, and the true limits of his most defining desires were all a delightful mystery.

"Why would you give me the chance to drown you?" The hint of a smile accompanied by a teasing tone in his voice made his attempt to deflect Alex's questions almost successful. "My, my, I thought you were smarter than that."

"Don't be a fool, I know you wouldn't survive a day without me." He leaned in and his lips touched Nigel's, dragging a small gasp out of him as he hadn't been expecting the kiss. How could he look at Alex and not immediately see how badly he wanted to kiss him all the time? How could he not guess, even when he wasn't looking, that he was desired so strongly?

"You taste of the sea," he said like a reprimand against his lips when they parted. "Like salt."

"You could too." He kissed Nigel again, letting him savor the ocean from his mouth, taking the time to tease with his teeth the soft skin of Nigel's lower lip. "Come on, there's no one here. This is the perfect time. In a couple of hours it will be too hot to be under the sun."

Nigel leaned back to look at him, unimpressed.

"Do you not know how to swim? Is that it?" He hadn't considered that possibility, but it could be the case. He could teach him to swim, how hard could it be? Or maybe he was one of those people who are afraid of the ocean and everything living in it. He didn't think that Nigel would have agreed to this trip if he had a phobia, and he seemed calm, if a little exasperated, but that was probably Alex's fault.

As if he'd wanted to prove this, Nigel rolled his eyes at him letting out a humorless laugh.

"I do know how to swim," he complained, as if simply suggesting it had been absurd.

"Then what is it?"

"It wasn't to swim that I came here for."

"To do what, then?"

Nigel looked around them, surveying the landscape with furrowed brows like he was trying to figure something out. He followed his eyes, trying to see what was capturing his attention, but he seemed to be looking at nothing, the way he frequently did when he got lost in his own thoughts.

"Don't you feel like we've been here before?" he asked under his breath. Somehow it felt like he was asking himself.

"What do you mean?"

A light breeze gave him sudden goosebumps as it dried the salt water on his body.

"I don't know." Nigel turned to him then and studied him for a couple of seconds, before taking the notebook from behind him and opening it back up on his lap. "This, being here, with you. It feels familiar somehow."

The page caught Alex's eye, as Nigel again busied himself with his drawings. On the clear paper he had sketched what looked like a high cliff on a coast not unlike the one they were at. On the walls of their spare room there were some loose pages with Nigel's work, mostly anatomical sketches, some dogs, some ravens, some tall, dark figures Alex couldn't quite identify, and a wide collection of religious references. But he couldn't remember ever seeing him do a landscape before.

"Well, it must be some sort of deja-vu, because we've never been to the beach before. Not together at least."

"If you say so," he replied, sounding unsure, and resumed drawing.

Alex sighed loudly and sat down next to Nigel on the sand, leaning back against the rock wall. He couldn't help closing his eyes. This part of the beach was quiet and peaceful, the sound of the small waves crashing against the rocks on the shore and the scratching of pencil on the paper nearly lulling him to sleep.

He was *so tired* . How had he not noticed it before?

The last exam of the semester had been just this past week and up until that point he had been on automatic mode, just focusing on his studies and trying to get enough sleep to not pass out at work. He was

good at keeping up, and the routine was enjoyable to some extent. But he couldn't remember the last time he had sat down next to Nigel and let his mind wander, simply being in his presence in silence. His friends from school had been good company, sharing a couple drinks after being kicked out of the library for being too loud. Lisa was always entertaining, even when they were on the clock. He had plenty of people to talk to these days, but no one could offer him the peace of mind that Nigel did.

He almost laughed at his own thoughts. Associating Nigel with peace was not something he had ever thought could be possible. And yet.

"Have you thought of going back to school?" he asked with his eyes still closed.

The scratching sounds stopped momentarily.

"What for?"

"I don't know, get a degree." The silence that followed was not the comfortable quiet they had been sharing before, it was heavy with tension and he had to open his eyes to look at Nigel.

He was looking down at the notebook with an unreadable expression, holding the pencil still in a tight grip. At some point he must've flipped the page, although Alex couldn't properly see the new piece from that angle with Nigel's arm blocking his vision.

"And why would I need one?" It sounded like anything but a question. More like a test, a challenge. "I already have access to all the knowledge I want."

All the knowledge was a bit of a stretch. There was so much he could benefit from by attending university, or any form of education. He decided to keep the comment to himself and follow along.

"Yes, you are brilliant, a prodigy, I know." He leaned forward to look at the page over Nigel's shoulder and got distracted by the soft hint of a smile he saw on his face. "But maybe it would do you good to take some classes. Meet new people."

The scratching resumed and Alex's eyes were drawn to the notebook where he could finally see what he'd been sketching. It was a crab, with long, thin legs and a wide, flat shell. One of its claws was still unfinished.

"You're the social butterfly, not me."

"I'm *not* a social butterfly." He drew back, putting most of his weight in his left arm, the sand digging into the palm of his hand.

The smile on Nigel's face grew even wider, only heightening his indignation. Nigel turned to look at him with an expression he couldn't properly identify. Was it fondness? It might have been. But there was something darker there too, in the way his pupils dilated ever so slightly and his lips quirked up on one side.

"I don't need anyone other than you," he said quietly, and Alex's heart did a little jump inside his chest.

Surely this wasn't healthy, he considered, as he watched Nigel turn his attention back to the graphite crab. It wasn't right; Nigel shouldn't focus solely on him. Centering every one of your needs in one person couldn't be good. And yet…

And yet he couldn't help feeling pleased that he was the only one in Nigel's life, that there was no one to compete with. It wasn't what he was supposed to wish for, it was definitely not healthy. But it's what they both wanted, so it must be alright.

The morning went by quietly. From time to time someone would walk by them–one very obviously lost tourist asked them for directions they were incapable of giving–but for the most part they were left alone. Alex even had a beer and Nigel only briefly glared at him before going back to his drawing. When he'd decided to take them to the beach he hadn't planned exactly what they would do, just that they would be going, and to anybody else it might've seemed like they were wasting time just sitting there. Being honest with himself, Alex had to admit that they *were* wasting their time, but that was exactly what they needed.

Alex went into the water one more time before noon when the sun would cast no shadows and the heat would be at its peak. Afterwards, he couldn't help but turn to look at the waves, the fading line of the horizon far out where everything was a deep dark blue, and he wished he'd gone there sooner. He would make it into a habit, he decided then. They would visit the shore as often as they could, he would make sure of that.

When he turned his back on the sea he was surprised to see Nigel standing there, just a couple of meters away. There was sand on his legs and the hem of his light gray shorts and his lips were starting to

look dry from the salty air. It would've made an adorable image if it weren't for the frown on his face and the disoriented look in his eyes.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" He walked the few steps between them at a slow pace.

Nigel simply continued to stare until they were face to face and then shook his head slightly, and his eyes refocused, like coming out of a daze.

"I had the strangest feeling just now."

Alex snorted before he could stop himself for which he received an offended glare. "Are you quite alright? You're acting all weird today." Not that Nigel was usually what one would call *normal* , of course, he thought, and he pressed the back of his hand against Nigel's forehead. It was slightly damp with a thin layer of sweat he could barely see, but not particularly warm.

"I'm not sick." He batted his hand away. "There's just *something* I can't remember and I keep feeling like it's going to come back to me, but then it doesn't." His expression turned pensive and his frown deepened. "I swear it's just on the tip of my tongue."

Alex was about to say something to that when the sound of a child’s laughter rang out from behind the rocks, along with fast steps approaching, the friction of feet loud against the rough sand.

They both turned in time to see a small boy running towards them with comically uncoordinated steps and a mischievous smile on his face. He kept looking over his shoulder and laughing uncontrollably, until he seemed to notice their presence for the first time and stopped when he was just about to crash against Nigel's legs. They both looked down at the boy and he looked back at them with wide eyes filled with wonder. No, he wasn't looking at *them* , he was craning his neck and staring directly at Nigel with his mouth open.

Alex observed the strange staring contest for a second, wondering if he should do something, when the boy smiled again and, in a surprising twist of events, lifted his arms and made grabby hands at Nigel.

"Upa!" He said with his little hands still in the air.

Alex had a hard time holding back the laugh that threatened to escape, but he managed.

"Ok, come on," he began, already moving to direct the child towards himself and *save* Nigel from what was probably an unwelcome show of misplaced trust.

He couldn't believe his eyes when Nigel, who apparently didn't need to be saved at all, leaned down and lifted the boy in his arms to support him on his hip, dragging a delighted giggle from the little one.

He was the one staring now, and if he were able to see himself he was positive the shock would be evident on his face. Nigel held the child with none of the awkwardness he would have expected and all the confidence of someone who had been taking care of children for at least a decade. They were both looking at each other like they were old friends, greyish blue meeting light amber eyes with soft pleased smiles. The boy had dark blond hair, long light lashes and chubby cheeks that gave him a cherubic look, like the angels in neoclassical paintings, and his skin was almost as pale as Nigel's. He grabbed the collar of his shirt with a tiny fist, pulling at it to grab Nigel's attention, although it was evident that he already had it. He started babbling something Alex wasn't able to understand, partly because it was in another language, most likely Spanish, but mostly because he was simply not very good at talking yet. Nigel nodded anyway, like he'd perfectly understood him. Maybe he had. At this point Alex believed him capable of anything.

Their attention was suddenly drawn away from the toddler by the sound of bigger, faster steps coming in their direction. This time a woman came rushing down the small hill behind the rocks looking disheveled and obviously distressed until her eyes found the three of them and they widened.

"Álex!" she yelled, followed by a sigh of relief.

The name made all the alarms go off inside of him. His heart violently jumped out of rhythm in his chest and his mouth went dry in a matter of seconds. It had been so long since anyone but Nigel had called him by that name, hearing it out in the open made his fight or flight response wake up like it hadn't in ages. It took a second for his brain to realize that she had said it in a way his name had never been pronounced and that it was not being directed at him, but at the child.

"¡Ay Dios mío! Alexánder, ¡qué susto me has pegado!" The woman ran towards them with her hands reaching for the child.

On hearing her voice, he turned in Nigel's hold and let go of his shirt

to reach back to her with the same enthusiasm with which he had asked to be picked up.

"Is he yours?" Nigel asked, already letting her take the boy from him.

"¿Qué?" she asked, looking confused for a second with her eyes fixed on the child while she checked him over. "Ah. Yes, my son. He runs away." Apparently satisfied with her examination, she looked between the two of them with a nervous smile. "Thank you."

"No hay de qué." Alex responded, sparing her the trouble of having to use English.

She looked like she could be the boy's mother. Her light brown hair had the same wavy texture as his and and her eyes were the same honey-like brown. She looked young, probably only a couple of years older than them.

Nigel was still watching the boy who was now playing with his mother's hair.

"Disculpen las molestias, le gusta correr y es muy sociable." She apologized, looking shyly at Nigel, but Alex had a feeling that he wasn't particularly upset at the boy' s sociability.

"No es molestia," Alex assured her for the both of them.

She nodded, holding her son tightly against her chest and starting to walk away. She was probably still nervous. If they hadn't been there to stop him, who knows what would've happened to him. He was heading straight for the water; the waves were small, but so was he and someone else could've done something to him as well. Alex wasn't even sure if *they* were the kind of people that children should be around.

She walked away and little Álex waved goodbye at them over her shoulder until they were both out of sight.

"Well, that was interesting."

Beside him Nigel huffed out a laugh. "Very." He turned to him with a grin. "I didn't think you would be so awkward around children."

"Awkward?" he laughed, somewhat offended. How could Alex's response be the most noteworthy thing about the interaction they just had? "I wasn't *awkward.* "

"You didn't see your face when that kid showed up. You were *frozen* ."

"Well, I wasn't expecting him to ask you to pick him up! If anything, I was just worried about *your* reaction."

"My reaction?" Nigel laughed incredulously, his voice rising an octave higher. "What did you think I was going to do?"

He opened his mouth to say something and then closed it, not really knowing how to answer. *What* was he expecting Nigel to do? Certainly not pick him up like it was the most natural thing in the world, that much was clear.

"I don't know," he admitted, looking away to where the other two had gone. "It just surprised me. That's all."

Nigel hummed quietly and Alex turned his head back towards him. He was looking at him with a fond expression, and his eyes had that soft glint in them, like he had just discovered something new and intriguing. It made him want to hide for a minute, made him feel vulnerable in a way he couldn't control.

He cleared his throat awkwardly, looking away. "Right, well, I'm starving. We should go get something to eat, before you pass out on me," he deflected, starting to walk towards their things laying on the sand.

"I won't pass out," Nigel complained but followed after him.

"Sure you won't. You wouldn't even remember to eat if I didn't say anything. I don't know how you're still alive."

He took one of the towels from his bag although the sun had already dried most of the water on him. He was starting to regret having let his hair grow out as long as he had; it was sticking to the back of his neck in an unpleasant way. It was a matter of getting used to it, he knew that, but soon he would have to conclude this experiment and determine that short hair was it for him after all. Having put his shirt back on, he turned to see Nigel putting his things back inside his own bag next to him. He caught a glimpse of the notebook before he closed it, the sketch of a human figure kneeling down on a rock was drawn on one of the pages. He would ask about it later. He wanted to see everything Nigel had drawn while he wasn’t paying attention.

They stayed at the beach for longer than Alex had thought they would. As the sun slowly slid down in the sky, they took a walk across the shore, some people passing by from time to time and the soft wet sand sinking under their feet. Not for the first time he wondered if he could reach for Nigel's hand, if someone would say something or if they were allowed to touch. It was more tempting than ever to forget about people when they were all minding their own business and there was barely anyone to see them anyway.

He could do it, he thought. Even if someone didn't like it. Was that even what he was worried about?

He didn't have the chance to make a decision because he suddenly realized that Nigel had stopped walking and was now standing a few meters behind him.

"What are you doing?" he called.

"I found something," Nigel replied, looking down at the sand and kneeling to take a look.

"What?" Alex walked the distance between them, led by curiosity.

Half buried in the sand in front of Nigel's feet was a dead crab, desiccated down to its exoskeleton, completely white. It was big, bigger than his fist and with even bigger claws. He'd never seen another one like it.

Nigel reached out to touch it with a cautious hand, like it was somehow not clear enough that the thing had been dead for a while, and Alex began shaking his head in disbelief.

"No," he deadpanned. "We're not taking it with us."

"Why not?"

"Nigel, that's disgusting. Don't touch it!"

But it was too late, he had already pulled it out from under the sand and was shaking it clean.

"Are the birds and the cats in our apartment any less disgusting than a crab?" He made no attempt to conceal the amusement in his voice.

"God, you're such a freak," he complained, but was already resigning himself to the fact that Nigel would spend the next day cleaning the

thing to put it somewhere in their apartment, where it would surely haunt him forever.

"So you've told me."

He remembered killing a crab, once. The memory came to him as he watched Nigel wrap his new pet in a towel and put it in a bag to take home. He had been 15 at most and he'd been on the coast somewhere, the exact location wasn't clear in his memory. It was all just part of a cruel game. A couple of his friends had found a crab, a lot smaller than the one Nigel had now, and had decided that harassing it for hours was the funniest thing they could do with their time. Alex had joined at some point, but just pushing it with a stick and giving it things to bite hadn't been entertaining enough for them. Maybe it had been the curious part of him, the one that liked carrying out *experiments* , but he'd wondered what would happen if they cut off one of its claws. He'd heard that they could live without them for a while but would eventually die as they were unable to feed themselves. So it was only out of mercy that after ripping both of its claws off, he'd cut through its underside with the blade of his jackknife.

There was something about deliberately ending a life, as small as it was, that made something shift inside of him that day. He hadn't been able to stop thinking about it, even hours after he'd done it. The boys had been pleased with his actions, they had all laughed and yelled as he'd tried to get to the crab's claws without getting bitten. They had approved his decision to kill it. It was normal, it seemed, to be so cruel. Just boys being boys, the ladies back at the hotel had said when they tried to scare them by showing them the severed bits of the creature they'd taken as a souvenir.

It was normal. That’s what he told himself.

And he'd continued to say the same thing every single time he'd hurt someone after that. It’s what he'd thought when Raj refused to take Nigel to the train to teach him a lesson. And then he'd shot John Colbie, and he'd felt it again. It hadn't been on purpose; even if he'd been aiming at Nigel, he hadn't meant it. And when he'd punched Enzo's detestable face it had been justified, even if those last punches hadn't been entirely necessary.

He wasn't so sure that it was normal anymore.

By seven that evening, they decided to take their leave from the beach. He would have to send a text to Lisa and ask her to lend him

the car for the night because he couldn't imagine having to drive to her house and then walk home to their apartment. The two hour drive back presented a challenge by itself given how tired he was, so there was no need to make it harder still.

"What's the point of lighting up bonfires if it's not even dark?" he grumbled when they walked by a more crowded part of the shore where some men were stacking pieces of wood into two piles, one next to the other.

"It will be soon."

"And then what?" His shoulders were sunburned and aching, the bag in his arms felt heavier than it had on the way to the beach, and he was positive that at least half of his annoyance was caused by that.

A group of people walked by them, clearly drunk and singing an obnoxious song he didn't recognize. The rest of the beach was crowded as they left it behind to find the car.

"And then it will be like stars dying on the sand. The light from the fire will be visible from far into the sea and it will keep the sharks away," Nigel said in a soft tone, looking back over his shoulder at where the bonfires were being lit.

"There are no sharks here," Alex muttered and then sighed. "Do you want to stay to see them?"

He saw Nigel turn to him with a frown and then shake his head, his expression softening. "No," he declared. "I want to go home now."

And so they did.

Lisa replied to his text with a series of emoticons Alex decided to interpret as permission to keep the car for the night. They were both absolutely exhausted when they finally got to the apartment, and he only insisted on both of them taking a shower because there was no way he was going to bed with his body sticky with salt water and sweat. Afterwards, Alex watched with no little amusement as Nigel cleaned the crab on the kitchen sink, too excited to wait to play with his new little toy. From the living room, he noticed with regret that Nigel's skin had not been truly affected by the sun. He was shirtless with his back to him, as pale as always, only a slight tint of red at the back of his neck that would most definitely fade in the next few days. Meanwhile, he knew Lisa was going to comment on the new freckles that were already starting to appear on his arms and nose. At least he

could be thankful that she wouldn't see the damage on his shoulders.

From the couch, he spotted Nigel's notebook on the coffee table, his bag open on the floor next to it. He could take a look, while Nigel was busy. He wouldn't be upset; the drawings weren't a secret and besides, he was curious. With this in mind, he leaned forward and pulled the notebook towards him, resting his elbows on his thighs and going through the pages until he saw the sketches he'd seen Nigel working on that day. There were a few more he hadn't noticed before: a seagull with a fish in its mouth, several unfinished attempts to sketch what seemed to be a human face, and finally the one that Alex had been looking for. It was a drawing of the back of a man with his arms at his sides and shirtless, looking away into the distance, his face invisible from the angle Nigel had chosen. The silhouette was extremely familiar.

He saw Nigel walk over to stand beside him.

"Is this supposed to be me?" Nigel looked over his shoulder at the drawing and hummed his confirmation. "I'm not this skinny."

The person on that page looked a lot like him, even if he couldn't see the face. But his arms were thinner, his shoulders less defined and his hair was short in a way he hadn't worn it in years. There was a boyish quality to his frame.

Nigel's brows furrowed in thought, looking over at the page as if he weren't the one who'd drawn it in the first place.

"You're not," he agreed.

Alex glanced at him with a raised brow. "Then why did you draw me like this?"

"I…" He licked his lips, they were dry and starting to look chapped, as they tended to get from time to time. "I don't know."

They kept the apartment faintly lit at night, and in the soft amber glow Nigel's eyes gleamed with uncertainty, his pupils shifting their focus from one corner of the page to the other, as if trying to decipher his own reasons.

He looked…disoriented. It tugged at Alex's heart in an unpleasant way.

"Alright," he said, closing the notebook. Nigel pulled back with a tiny

jump at the sound it made. "That's enough for today, I think. I can't stay awake for a second longer."

As if to prove his point, he yawned and stretched back on the couch before standing up and walking towards the bedroom.

"You coming or…?" he asked from the door when Nigel only watched him from his place next to the couch, and he extended his hand expectantly.

A second later, Nigel joined him.

Chapter End Notes

Posting this just before a tropical storm hits my city and I lose power and internet service

Find me on Tumblr

I was so lost, but now I believe

Chapter Summary

Nigel takes a trip down the memory lane

Chapter Notes

Check the end notes for warnings on this chapter if you don't mind the mild spoilers! And also for an important announcement.

A million thanks to GrandMoffTisper for beta reading and also pretty much working as a co author on this story. Go check their recently posted
like minds one shot
if you haven't yet. (I also posted another one so go check my account 👁)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Nigel was going through the client names in the database on the computer at work. He had a mild but severely annoying headache that had accompanied him for the greater part of his shift. The radio was on somewhere in the back; the owner said it helped to lift the spirits but he wasn't the one having to deal with the station's poor taste in music and the stale jokes that came on from time to time. At least it wasn't the news, or sports, he didn't think he could stand that.

Usually he wouldn't mind. As much as he liked the quiet, he was well accustomed to ignoring his surroundings in order to do his job, or anything else that would be subject to interruptions. But for the past week or so he'd been particularly easy to irritate. The headaches had been frequent and the cause for them still remained a mystery. It was strange to be so aware of something like *pain,* something he wasn't used to even noticing. It wasn't just the pain though; at times he felt like there was something wrong, something missing, like when you walk into a room and you can't remember what you were about to do.

It was fine, he told himself. It would pass, like most things did.

At the moment he only had to remember the name of the lady that was supposed to pay for her last order of antidepressants. She was behind on her payments. The boss let some clients take their orders without paying sometimes. He was too soft in Nigel's opinion, far too trusting to be owning a business. And now Nigel had to make sure

that people wouldn't just take advantage of that. He wasn't even sure of *what* was in the little bags he handed this woman every couple of weeks, as some of the orders were premade by someone else. It wasn't antidepressants per se; they called it that but it was prescribed by a naturopathic doctor. He was pretty sure that whatever it was, it had marijuana in it.

He went over the Excel sheet for the third time, name after name, trying to find the right one with the terrible organization system they had. Was it Ashley? No, that was the girl with the pollen allergy. They were both blondes and had an English accent so it was easy to get them mixed-up.

Someone rang the bell at the counter and he lifted his eyes from the computer.

"Alison," he said with realization.

The shorthaired woman standing there blinked at him with a blank expression. "Yes?" she asked with a frown.

Nigel stood up, reached to grab a small paper bag from the stacked orders on the shelf behind him, and walked over to the counter. As soon as he put it in front of her, the lady tried to grab it, only to be left wanting when Nigel quickly pulled it out of her reach.

"I'm sorry, but it seems that you still haven't paid for the last order you picked up from us."

She blinked once more, brows raised almost all the way to her hairline. "Rolando said I could pay for it later."

" *Mr. Ortega* isn't here today," he deadpanned. "And it is already *later* ."

They glared at each other for a long minute until she sighed and said, "Alright, do you take cash?"

"Yes." He smiled, pleased at his triumph.

The following hours of his shift were dull and uneventful. It felt like most of the past few days had been that way. The man on the radio introduced a song that someone requested and Nigel listened to the first chords as he moved the flasks of belladonna drops and scorpion venom from the box to the shelf for homeopathic remedies.

"Carry this picture for luck. Kept in a locket,

Tucked in your collar, close to your chest.

Make it a secret, shown to the closest friends."

His hand, holding a boxcutter over one of the boxes, stilled at the sound. The song was familiar, in the same way some smells remind you of something you can't quite place. He'd been having similar experiences ever since he'd picked up that postcard about a month ago. He listened carefully to each line, not sure where he'd heard them before. The lyrics didn't come to him as he listened, he couldn't sing along or even hum the melody, but it made him feel nostalgic somehow.

He thought of looking it up later, but then when he got home the entire apartment smelled faintly of smoke and he had to salvage their dinner from Alex's untalented hands. By the time he went to bed he'd forgotten about the song.

On Friday night, Nigel poured a glass of whiskey and handed it to Alex before sitting down across from him on the couch.

"Are you feeling alright?" Alex raised a brow at him from the armchair. He had his feet propped up on the coffee table, a habit he seemed incapable of changing, and the laptop on his lap.

Nigel just shrugged in response.

"Where's the bottle?"

"Somewhere you can't reach."

Alex snorted at that. "So you will encourage a glass, but no more than that."

"My benevolence has its limits."

He watched him take a sip of the whiskey and shake his head before looking back down at the screen.

Alex's lips were…really something. Full and lush and now wet from the drink. Nigel admired the view with something like want, heat pooling somewhere deep within his belly. Those same lips curved into a smile and Alex's eyes shone with laughter.

"Something funny?" Nigel leaned forward almost unconsciously, trying to see what he was laughing at.

"Do you remember those *ridiculously hard* math olympiads they had every year? I can't remember if you were there for the last one. Anyway, I had the highest grade in the school's history." He was speaking with so much pride, shoulders relaxed and voice secure.

He was so full of himself, and Nigel loved it.

"They just posted this year's winners and guess what, I still have the record for the highest score. It's right there on their website and all."

Not being able to hold back anymore, Nigel stood to look over Alex's head at the screen. In an automatic gesture, his hands moved to rest over his shoulders and Alex slumped even further against the back of the chair.

On the website he saw a list of names for the winners and right below them it was indeed declared that Alex Forbes was the student with the highest score to date. Along with each participant's name there was a picture attached and a brief description of their academic achievements. There were two paragraphs for Alex and several pictures as well. It was pretty obvious that *someone* at the school had a preference. It didn't matter if he was the all-time winner, that year's students should've had more focus.

Nigel hummed, amused by Alex's joy for something so trivial. He was top of his class once again at his university and he was celebrating an old victory over a simple math contest. There was room for all kinds of pride in him, it seemed.

He was about to point this out to him, when one of the pictures caught his eye.

"Where was that?" He pointed at the screen.

"I'm not sure," Alex said, leaning closer to it. "That was *ages* ago, don't know why they chose a picture that old."

The fact that it was old was only one of the reasons why Nigel felt

drawn to it. In the image, there was a very young Alex wearing a white shirt with long sleeves. His cheeks were flushed–no, slightly sunburned if the amount and color of his freckles were anything to go by. The sky behind him was the clearest blue one could imagine.

"Wait, I think it's from that week my father took me to Falmouth. I must've been like fifteen." He laughed. "Jesus, I look like a baby, don't I?"

He did look young, a version of Alex that Nigel didn't have the privilege of meeting. He looked familiar, Nigel recognized, and the off-putting nostalgia grew again inside his chest.

He couldn't stop staring.

Monday rolled around and then Tuesday and Nigel's headache was still there, if slightly less severe. A melody was stuck in his head, the lyrics unreachable to him no matter no how hard he tried to remember them. He got home early that day. There were still some leftovers from the night before that they could have for dinner, so he went to take a shower and hoped that he could just lay down and close his eyes until Alex got home. It was always better when Alex came home.

After the shower, he walked into the spare room without thinking, barefoot, with his hair wet and a towel over his shoulders. The room was mostly unused, the cabinets filled with things they didn't want to deal with, as were the walls with Nigel's drawings. It was quiet and peaceful and Nigel's thoughts could flow more easily in there.

The shower had cleared his mind, and he knew what to do.

There had been water, he could remember that, the song talked about it. And there was also a man, so tall that he couldn't see his face.

Nigel took a pen in his hand, black ink against white paper sheets, it all made more sense now.

The man's figure towered over him in a dark shadow, but as big as he was, he didn't matter, for the waves swallowed him whole and he was out of his sight.

The song talked about a picture and Nigel could see it, a boy with bright eyes and bright hair.

It was a good thing that he had recently bought watercolors, Nigel thought.

The boy looked at him with a set of emeralds, and fire came out of his hands. He was dangerous but Nigel couldn't stay away. His warmth was precious and it lured him in like a moth to a flame.

He heard a dog's bark and saw a beast of great size with its fangs out, ready to bite.

He recognized it as a bad omen, only bad things happened after he'd seen that dog, so Nigel made it the size of the entire sheet, so big it could barely fit.

A crab came out of the dog's mouth, tearing the flesh with its claws.

Nigel saw himself staring as both animals fell to the ground, dead.

He wanted to scream, but only the emerald green could help and they weren't looking at him.

He was alone.The waves brought the tall, imposing man back.

Nigel couldn't speak.

His eyes bled a stream of blue over his colorless cheeks.

"What are you doing?"

Hearing Alex's voice felt like coming out of general anesthesia. He was numb all over and had to blink several times to get his eyes to focus on the shape standing at the door.

What was he doing, exactly? That was a good question.

At some point he'd sat on the floor, his hands were stained with ink and chalk and watercolors. Looking around, there were a dozen drawings all around him. He couldn't remember drawing so much.

"Nigel, what's all this?" Almost unexpectedly Alex was crouching in front of him, looking at all the scrambled illustrations with a frown.

"I remembered," was all he could say. Suddenly everything made sense. The pieces had slowly come together to form a clearer picture.

"What did you remember? Nigel, are you…"

And there was that look, the one he'd never wanted to see again but that no matter what, Alex kept giving him.

I will explain and he'll understand.

"I'm fine," he tried to reassure him, leaning forward and grabbing Alex's wrists with stained hands. "I know why the beach felt familiar, I know why *you* felt familiar. From the first time I saw you, no-" He shook his head and laughed. "From the *second* time. We'd met before, Alex, don't you remember?"

Alex regarded him with wary eyes. "You'll have to be more specific."

"Yes, I will, I promise that I'll explain, just-" He let go of Alex's wrists. "Just *please* , sit down with me, it's a long story to tell." It was a plea, his mind was screaming at him, so much information he had forgotten now available to him again. He needed to tell Alex.

Fortunately he listened. Moving the drawings to make room for himself, Alex sat down in front of him with his legs crossed. His eyes had trouble looking away from the pieces, shifting from one to the other. Nigel couldn't blame him, they were haunting images.

"Fine, tell me," he prompted but before Nigel could say anything he raised a hand to stop him. "But you have to promise me that if you start getting all weird, you'll let me stop you."

"Weird?" he huffed.

Alex shook his head slowly. "Yes, weird. Come on, don't make me say it, you know what I mean."

He really didn't.

"You've been acting *strange* lately, so if this is what's bothering you, fine, you can tell me. But I don't want you to have one of those *episodes* ." He spat the word with clear disdain. "Or whatever they are. So if you get an urge to do something stupid, just stop talking, or let me stop you. Alright?"

He wasn't sure of what was being asked of him. What could qualify as something stupid? Either way, Alex required confirmation in order to let Nigel proceed with his story, so he gave it to him.

"Fine," he said and Alex nodded, seemingly pleased by his answer.

“Do you remember what you said the other day, about the time you went to Falmouth?”

“Yes?”

“Well, I was there too.” Alex’s frown deepened and Nigel couldn’t help but smile. “It’s all been coming back to me in bits and pieces, but I’m sure now, I remember it so clearly.”

He could finally see Alex, looking at the water with his back to him, the same way he’d done it just a week ago, except that he was about a head shorter back then and his shoulders far more narrow. Closer to a boy than he was to being a man.

With Alex's attention on him, he began his story.

In the summer of 2004, John Colbie had dragged his family to Falmouth, Cornwall, for a gathering that only he would be participating in, since it was for the Order’s members only. Perhaps *dragged* wasn’t the right word. Helen Colbie had gone willingly, happy to spend some time away from home. It was Nigel, of course, who had inwardly cursed his father's command disguised as a request to join them, given with only a few days' notice. He’d had things that he wanted to do, but who would care about the summer plans of a 14 year old with no friends?

He had found solace in long walks along the shore, searching for both living and dead things that would spark his interest.

That morning he’d been so engrossed trying to get a crab to come out of its burrow with a stick that he didn’t realize he wasn’t the only one out there on the beach. Laughter could be heard from the top of a small cliff, just a few meters away from him. When he looked up he saw a small group of boys that seemed to be around his age, jokingly pushing each other around. Nigel watched them for a minute with little to no interest. The crab had released the stick and was now probably far from his reach, safe in the depths of its home.

The six boys were dressed in fine clothing, incredibly impractical for the setting they were in, which made him think that they were the sons of other members of the Order and had gone to the beach on a whim from the manor they were staying at. Of course, that meant he

would have to leave; they were too loud and he didn't want to be seen by them. They looked like trouble, and he needed anything but.

"Jump!" one of them yelled, and Nigel saw him smiling wide. "Didn't you say you would do anything?" The rest were laughing hysterically, all but one of them, a shorter boy with blond hair that was shaking his head with a nervous smile.

"You're joking," he laughed.

"Come on, we came all this way, don't disappoint me." That boy was slighter taller than the rest, his hair a light chestnut with a hint of red and although Nigel couldn't properly see them from where he was standing, his eyes seemed to be green. There were freckles on every visible part of his skin.

"Are you mental?" The other boy was no longer smiling.

"What? Don't you know how to swim?" The other four laughed at that.

"Let's just push him, Alex!" a dark haired boy said to the taller one, grinning mischievously.

"No," the boy, Alex, said with a grin of his own. "There's no point if we make him, he needs to have the balls to do it himself."

"I can't do it!" the blond one yelled nervously. "My parents will kill me if I ruin my clothes!"

"You can't hang out with us if you're too afraid of mommy and daddy." Alex mocked him, taking a step closer, making him stagger back dangerously close to the edge of the rock.

So it was one of those things, Nigel thought. He'd seen and heard of enough initiation rites before. This was a pretty pathetic attempt, but obviously an example, nonetheless.

"Come on now, jump, Jacob. You know you have to."

Everything went quiet and for a second Nigel thought that they would change their minds and finally push the poor bastard in the water, when suddenly he turned around and took a leap and then the sound of water splashing and the cheers of the group broke the silence.

Nigel shook his head and hid behind some rocks as the group started

climbing down from the cliff.

“See? That wasn’t so hard, was it?”

“I'm so screwed,” Jacob lamented.

“You should be glad you only had to get a bit wet,” one of the others said. “Last time Alex made someone eat a *living worm.* ”

Their voices started fading out as they walked away and within a minute Nigel was all alone again.

Thinking about it now, there was so much about that summer that Nigel still couldn’t remember very well. Maybe he had exaggerated it a bit when he told Alex that everything was clear. Perhaps a more accurate expression would be that *everything important* was clear. He had a feeling that he had talked with his father that day and in the next memory he had of himself he was wearing different clothes, but he didn’t know why he’d changed. There was a feeling of wrongness about the entirety of it. A tension that was different from the usual mutual disdain between him and his father. Something had happened before they went to Falmouth, but he couldn’t remember what and thinking about it made his head hurt again, so he didn’t.

The next time he saw Alex the sun was beginning to set, and he and his friends had gotten to the beach before Nigel. He had planned to stay out of their way, walk until he was left alone so he could just stare at the ocean where everything was quiet and still. But then he heard what the boys were saying.

“Be careful, Alex, it can chop your finger off!”

“Give me the stick before it crawls back inside.”

Their animated voices carried across the otherwise lonely beach. They were crouched around a spot on the sand behind some rocks and Nigel recognized the place as the one where he had been sitting just a day before. It was very clear what they were doing and it became even clearer when one of them lifted a long stick at the end of which was a crab, holding onto it with one claw. The boys cheered and laughed at their achievement. Nigel watched them from a few meters away, where they could’ve easily seen him had they not been so focused on

their childish game.

“You reckon it can live if we chop the claws off of it?” Nigel’s heart lurched at the thought. His eyes zeroed on Alex as he said it and he recognized something on his face, a familiar emotion he couldn’t pinpoint.

“That’s gross!”

They did it anyway, laughing and joking as the poor animal tried to pinch them in the process. After the crab no longer had claws to defend itself with, Alex said the most interesting thing.

“We should kill it.” Nigel imagined that if he had been a cat his ears would’ve perked up at that. He had a sudden urge to get closer, to watch, not because he wanted to see the animal’s life coming to an end–he would’ve preferred that it be kept alive–but because the way this Alex boy had said it had so much feeling behind it. He hadn’t whispered it, he was sure and determined to kill the crab, but he said it so softly, like silk on his tongue instead of words, and his own eyes had widened as soon as he’d said it, as if he was surprised at himself.

“How do you even kill a crab?”

“Do we smash it with a rock?”

His subjects followed along, no doubt, no hesitation. The same boy that had been begging not to be thrown into the water the day before was now mindlessly following the leader he had chosen to risk punishment for.

It was truly remarkable.

Alex took a jackknife out of his pocket and looked at the mutilated crab that was now helplessly lying on the ground.

“It’s going to die anyway, it will starve without its claws,” he explained, even though no one had asked for his reasons. Nigel knew this to be true, and he knew even better the look in Alex's eyes, even though it was only the second time he’d seen him. The glimmer of fire behind the green of his iris was unmistakable.

Without another comment from him or his companions, he cut through the crab’s soft underside with force until it was dead.

The group left shortly after, taking the claws with them.

Alex stayed behind for a short moment and Nigel watched him as he looked out at the sea with his back turned to him. For a moment he wondered if he could approach him, make himself known. But then the others called out Alex's name and he left as well.

Nigel inspected the remains of the crab, tossed on the sand without a care for its dignity. There was nothing he could do for it. Although his skills at preserving animals' bodies were improving by the day, this one was far too damaged to be salvaged.

"Nigel, are you alright?"

His mother asked him one of those nights he couldn't yet remember very well. She had just gotten back from a restaurant, he thought. Her dress was lying on the bed and she had changed into a nightgown. She was still wearing her jewelry, a green precious stone resting over her chest and matching emerald earrings, and her hair was up in a stylized bun. She smelled of caramel and liquor.

"You're soaking wet, what happened?"

His past self didn't answer so there was no way of recalling the events that had led to him standing in his parents' bedroom, water dripping from his hair and over his face down his entire body. His clothes were also soaked, weighing down on him, and he had no shoes on.

A drop fell on his lips. There was no salt in it.

His mother stepped closer, concern evident on her face and she let out a distressed whimper as she looked down at his right hand. Nigel didn't follow her eyes to see, but he could feel the sharp edge of the back of the scalpel against his index finger. He always took it with him everywhere he went, but he wasn't sure why it was necessary at the moment.

She led him to the bathroom in his room and he let her. Her hands were shaking when she went to open the door and she told him to wait outside. When he was finally allowed in, he heard water going down the drain in the tub and she stood in front of it, almost like she didn't want him to see it. He didn't know why it was important, or why it had been filled with water. She handed him a towel and helped him to change into dry clothes.

"Come on darling, your father will be back soon, we have to hurry,"

she said, trying to sound calm, but Nigel could hear the fear in her voice. “You’re going to be alright,” she promised. “You have to talk to me about these things, Nigel.” She was crying. He didn’t know what she was asking him to talk about.

Soon after, he fell asleep in the comfort of his mother’s arms.

Nigel always liked going out at midnight, when everyone was inside and in their beds and everything was dark. He slept very little in favor of wandering around all alone. That night he wasn’t the only one outside though. A song could be heard nearby, one he hadn’t heard before.

“I don’t care what he wants, I’m not joining his stupid club of middle aged fanatics.” Sitting under the light of a lamp post, backs against a wall, Alex, Jacob and another boy were talking in low voices.

The dark haired boy shushed him, looking alarmed. “Be quiet, someone could hear you!”

“Like I care. My father already knows what I think about the bloody *Order* ,” he said with blatant scorn.

Nigel continued to silently walk towards them.

“Then why does he want you to join?” Jacob asked.

“He thinks he can change my mind by the time I’m old enough to do it, or just make me.” Alex laughed bitterly. “Not a chance of *that* happening, I can tell you.”

“My dad said it could help, we can all use the connections,” Jacob said with a shrug.

It looked like Alex was about to say something, but then they noticed Nigel approaching.

“Who’s there?” he shouted. The other two began to get up from the ground.

Nigel moved out of the shadows until the light of the lamp post was illuminating him. Up close he could see that they had a bottle of whiskey with them. The song continued in the background.

“And meet me at quarter to seven,

The sun will still shine then, at this time of year.

We'll head to the inlet. And we'll share a bottle there."

"What are you doing here?" the dark haired boy asked, not sitting back down but looking far more relaxed than just a second ago.

"I could ask you the same thing," Nigel huffed.

"Yeah well, you're not invited, so fuck off," Alex spat, opening the bottle to take a swig. His face twisted in a grimace, clearly unused to the taste of hard liquor.

Nigel shook his head, mostly uninterested in the interaction.

"And down to the edge of the water,

Where we'll spill our guts,

And we'll name our fears. I'll give you this picture.

Keep it and don't be scared."

As he started to walk away, Alex called out.

"Hey!" Nigel turned to him. "Don't tell anyone you saw us here, you hear me? Especially not my father. Or I'll push you off the fucking cliff." The last part he added like an afterthought, as if he remembered that he couldn't simply make a request.

"I don't even know who your father is."

"Even better. Now get out of here."

He did, smiling to himself. It was very ironic, how he'd asked not to be exposed to his father just seconds after saying that he didn't care about what he thought. Not to mention the way he spoke so badly of The Order while he was there, creating his own little fan club through threats and sheer intimidation.

"I believe in the coast,

Your smile is the most genuine thing I've ever seen.

I was so lost, but now, I believe"

The voice on the radio went silent and another song began.

The next morning a dead dog was found lying on one of the tables on the terrace, a kitchen knife protruding from its stomach. Everyone came to watch when the wife of one of John Colbie's friends screamed in horror upon discovering it. It was barely six in the morning and the staff had somehow failed to see it before their patrons. A crowd gathered around the scene while they rushed to clean up the mess, ushering the guests off to somewhere more pleasant.

Nigel lamented the death of the animal, curious about who its executioner might've been and their motives. Across from him on the other side of the terrace Alex stood next to his father looking at the scene with an expression of disgust on his face. Hypocrite. As if he hadn't killed another animal in a similar manner not that long ago. He was full of contradictions.

What happened next was a little less clear for Nigel.

Back in their room, John had been very upset, which was usual for him and given the recent events, was at least justified. Except that he seemed to be upset *at Nigel* –also usual, but genuinely uncalled for.

His mother had begged his father to stop. But stop what? He didn't know.

"He didn't do it!" she had cried. "Nigel, tell him it wasn't you!"

He couldn't remember answering. He wasn't even sure if he had been in the room with them to begin with. In his memories he could see himself as an observer, watching from a distance as his parents argued.

It hurt to think about and it made his head dizzy. So he didn't.

At the end of his telling Alex was looking at him like he'd seen a ghost. It made Nigel want to start telling it all over again. Had he not understood what this meant? Couldn't he see that they had been meant to know each other from the start? They had crossed each other's paths earlier than they'd thought.

"Nigel, that's…" He looked around them, at the drawings on the floor, and the window across the room, anywhere but at Nigel.

He felt something inside him twist with anxiety. “Are you displeased by knowing this?” He frowned. “Or do you not believe me?”

“No!” Alex practically yelled. “I mean, yes, of course I believe you.” He shook his head and a strand of reddish hair fell loose from behind his ear. “It’s just that, do you not see how odd it is, that you didn’t remember this until today?”

“I don’t see how that matters.”

Alex sighed, closing his eyes and throwing his head back. “Of course you don’t.” He rubbed his eyes with one hand and sighed once more before opening them. The look he gave him was less exasperated and more earnest. “Alright.” He stood from his place in front of Nigel and sat next to him with his back against the desk. “I don’t remember meeting you that summer.”

His heart did that funny thing again where it wanted to jump out of his chest, before Alex eased his fears.

“But I do remember most of everything else. My father was insufferable that year, it was when he started talking more openly about the Order. I thought he was full of bullshit, so I didn’t listen.” He chuckled. “Look at where that got me.”

“You have gotten much farther than you ever would have under his guidance,” he rushed to assure him.

“Oh, I know.”

He looked at Alex and was met with apprehension. His lips pursed in a line, his eyes carefully taking in Nigel like he was a complicated math equation.

He had been right all those years ago: Alex’s eyes were incredibly beautiful. He was so grateful to have the privilege to see them up close now.

“I wish I could remember you,” he said softly, like he was telling a secret. “But I was a self-centered bastard that only paid attention to myself.”

“ *Were* ?” Nigel teased.

Alex bumped their shoulders together. “Fuck off,” he complained with a smile of his own.

They remained silent for a minute, the sound of their breathing the only thing he could hear in the room, along with his beating heart.

“What I mean is, I’m glad that you saw me, even if I didn’t see you right away.”

Nigel’s eyes widened at the admission.

“I don’t know what this means, if it even means anything,” he continued. “But what matters is that we found each other in the end.”

“We were destined to,” he said, and he was certain of it, now more than ever.

“ *Destined,* ” Alex muttered. He leaned closer to him, pressing his face to his damp hair.

A confusing mixture of feelings washed over Nigel at that moment. Nostalgia, for the past he had forgotten; fear, for the holes in his memories that seemed more eager to come back with each passing day; longing for the future that they were building; and also, *love* . Something he had come to expect but which was no less frightening when it did appear. His hands started shaking and he hung onto Alex’s white shirt for support.

“Ja-,” he swallowed the name before it escaped his lungs. It took a lot of effort, but he managed to speak. “Alex, I-” Each syllable hurt. Alex’s arms circled him and he rearranged them so Nigel’s face was on his shoulder.

Such a shame, he would stain his shirt with his tears.

“I know,” Alex murmured against his ear. “You don’t have to say it.”

But I want to, he thought. *Why does it feel like something bad will happen if I do?*

On the floor, holding onto Alex like his life depended on it–and maybe it did–he had a sudden deja vu. This time though, he was far less confused. He knew what he wanted, even if he couldn’t properly speak of it out loud.

It was a little bit embarrassing when they parted and the first thing he did was sneeze. He had forgotten that there was still a damp towel over his shoulders.

Alex laughed. “Alright, go dry your hair or something, because if you get sick then *I’ll* get sick too."

Nigel hummed in agreement, not even bothering to argue with him.

They both stood up. His legs hurt and he wondered, not for the first time that afternoon, how long he had been sitting on the floor.

In their bedroom, he stood in front of the drawers for a second, so tired it was hard to think. Without him noticing it, Alex appeared next to him, wrapping arm around his waist, hand over his hip before his lips pressed softly against his temple.

Nigel smiled, satisfied.

Truly, everything was always better when Alex came home.

Chapter End Notes

CW for this chapter: mentions of animal cruelty, death of an animal, implied child abuse, implied attempted suicide, depersonalization, repression as a defense mechanism

⚠ Important announcement for readers that don't have an AO3 account!
You may have heard of AI's scrapping this site for content and also leaving spam comments to promote other sites or just acting like a normal user would just to get a believable history on AO3. Because of this I will be slowly restricting my works so they're only available for registered users. I won't do it for this story yet but I will at some point and the rest of my older fics have been hidden for non users already. I don't want to do it because I understand the reasons why some people might not want to get an account and also because most of this story's readers aren't registered users. Unfortunately it's the only way I can protect my work from AI and very bad people trying to profit on other's people's work without their permission. I advice you that if you haven't yet go request an account, the waiting line isn't that long and you can still read while you wait. More and more users are doing this so if not for this story then get an account for literally every story you want to read on AO3, it's my advice. I will let you all know before I do it.

You can learn more about this here or here

You and me and the people around us

Chapter Summary

Alex is confronted by some truths

Chapter Notes

Warnings for this chapter: Mentions of severe mental health issues, (brief) demeaning language regarding mental illnesses, mentioned attempted murder and suicide, internalized homophobia (you know who that is for)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

As a general rule, Alex didn't particularly like altering his routine, especially if the change was unplanned. However, there was something incredibly liberating about an impromptu day off, courtesy of the air-conditioning at Alicia's finally giving out in the middle of August and needing emergency maintenance. There was no way that anyone was going to work in that heat, so she had closed down the place for the day and hoped to get everything working by the next morning.

Alex was delighted to have a free day.

It would've been even more perfect if it had coincided with Nigel's day off, but not even they were that lucky.

Still, that afternoon he decided to do something he had thought of doing but hadn't been able to until that day.

He walked all the way to *"Remedios Naturales Ortega"* , as it read on the sign over the worn-out wooden doors of the pharmacy. He looked at his watch. Nigel's shift had just ended; he had gotten there just in time.

Right as he looked up the doors opened with the sound of a glass wind chime and Nigel appeared and closed the door behind him, adjusting the messenger bag over his shoulder and turning to walk in Alex's direction.

Alex smirked to himself when Nigel's eyes did a double take at seeing him.

"What are you doing here?" Nigel asked, slowing his steps to meet him. His dark brows were furrowed and his shoulders tense.

"What? I can't come pick you up?" Alex countered with no real heat.

"Don't you have work?"

"The bar is closed today, we had some technical issues." He reached to take Nigel's bag to put it over his own shoulder. Nigel willingly handed it over but he continued to frown.

"Nothing happened, then?"

It dawned on Alex then that maybe showing up unannounced when he'd never done it before could possibly trigger Nigel's paranoia.

"No," he reassured him, the tiniest bit of annoyance in his voice at having to explain himself. "I just thought I'd come pick you up."

The apprehension slowly melted away from Nigel's features, gaze softening and lips slightly lifting to one side.

"I see."

"Don't think I'll do it again though," Alex scoffed. "With the way you're reacting."

Nigel's smirk fully appeared then, as expected. "There's no need to act all offended." He leaned forward, getting in Alex's space. "I'm *very much* appreciative of your gesture," he said, so softly he was practically purring.

They were so close they could've kissed, right there and then, but they were in front of Nigel's workplace and Alex didn't know how his boss felt about the likes of them.

Memories of two ladies, outraged by a kiss, made their way to the front of Alex's mind and he pulled away.

"Come on, I'm tired of carrying your things already," he said, turning around to walk home. Nigel followed.

Just as they were about to leave, the door opened behind them and two people, a middle aged man and a blonde woman immersed in a heated conversation left the establishment. The man stopped what he was saying mid-sentence at seeing them.

"Ah, Noah, todavía estás aquí. I thought you were gone," he said in a thick accent and smiled at Nigel.

"Just leaving now, Mr. Ortega."

"Bien, bien" The man nodded and the woman next to him remained quiet, but the way she shifted her weight from one foot to the other gave away her impatience. "Well, have a nice afternoon."

Nigel nodded in acknowledgement and the couple resumed their conversation as they walked away from them.

Alex felt relieved that he had not kissed Nigel then. He had been right; it was too early, the sun still out, and too many people were out and about. Last thing he wanted was to make things uncomfortable for Nigel when he had struggled so much to find a job that he didn't hate and where they tolerated his eccentricities.

He kept his thoughts to himself as they walked back to the apartment in silence.

Nigel loved silence, Alex had noticed. There were times when he realized that he'd spent the entire day without hearing Nigel's voice, even when they had both been together for the entirety of it. He compensated for it though; whenever he found something he was passionate about he would just not shut up about it. If Alex wanted him to talk he just had to ask about the book he was reading or what he was planning to do with the new plant he'd bought. Sometimes he did that–asked something he wasn't particularly interested in just to see the spark that lit in Nigel's eyes. It was endearing, seeing him so invested in something that wasn't self-destructive.

Just a couple of blocks from the apartment they walked past a park and the sight of two familiar faces made Alex curse under his breath.

"That can't be good." He sighed, a reluctant smile already appearing on his face.

"What?" Nigel asked, lifting his eyes from the rock he'd been kicking for about a block.

Ahead of them Lisa was talking with someone he knew Nigel didn't personally know and therefore couldn't possibly recognize.

He didn't have time to explain the situation before both spotted them

"¡Mirá, Cazador!" Diego called in an enthusiastic voice, and Alex approached the young man who was already reaching an arm out to him.

"Diego," he replied, giving him a quick side hug and letting out a startled laugh when he received a strong pat on his back.

Lisa looked between the two of them, open mouthed. "You two know each other," she affirmed more than asked.

"Me and Alan? ¡Pero claro!" Diego smiled at her, his brown eyes glinting with mischief, as they usually did. "I know all the fun people, didn't I tell you?" he said with a wink that startled a laugh out of her.

"We go to the same university," Alex clarified with a sigh, before Diego could make up some elaborate anecdote of how they had met.

In reality he wouldn't have to lie; what had really happened was embarrassing enough. Alex had been too enthralled by a book to notice Diego walking in his direction and they had literally bumped into each other. To make matters worse, Alex had been carrying a cup of coffee that had fortunately cooled down enough to not burn Diego's skin when it inevitably spilled on him. Alex had been extremely mortified by the whole thing but Diego had laughed it off, as he did most things. He had asked Alex to hold his things for a moment and had taken his shirt off right there in one of the gardens, because apparently he was the type of person that carries a change of clothes with them at all times. Later Alex learned that Diego had the habit of spending the night literally anywhere but at his apartment and, in his own words, he liked to be prepared. But it had been then that he'd seen Diego's tattoos. It was pretty obvious that he was well on his way to being heavily tattooed, the ink on his arms leaving almost no room for any new pieces and surely his neck would follow soon. But during the brief moments where his torso had been fully uncovered Alex had seen the thing that really drew his attention. Diego had a huge, incomplete tattoo of a cathedral that took all the space from under his chest to the start of his pelvic area.

"Like the ink?" he'd asked and Alex had felt like he'd been caught.

"Not particularly," he'd shrugged.

"I'm making my way to a full bodysuit. This one is taking a while to get finished and a lot of money too, but it's going to be worth it," he had replied in spite of Alex's apparent disinterest.

In all honesty he had known from the moment he saw the cathedral on Diego's skin that they were going to get along.

“Oh,” Lisa said, clapping her hands together. “you’re in history too, then?”

Diego snorted, like the idea was somehow ridiculous. “Nah, I’m in philosophy.”

“Lisa and I work together,” Alex explained before Diego had the chance to ask, crossing his arms over his chest, noticing out of the corner of his eye that Nigel was standing very still half a meter behind him. “But how do *you two* know each other?”

“We don’t. We just bought the same book at the same stall and started talking.” As evidence each lifted their respective copies of “Niebla” by Miguel de Unamuno, to which Alex couldn’t help raising a judgmental eyebrow. “You should have introduced us sooner, Alan, it’s not fair that you keep your friends a secret from each other.”

Lisa giggled, either in amusement or because she had fallen for Diego’s charm, he wasn’t sure. He was about to protest the accusation when Diego suddenly seemed to notice that there was someone else that they had been ignoring, as his eyes looked over Alex’s shoulder to where Nigel was waiting in silence.

“Speaking of, who is your friend? I thought you had better manners,” he said, taking a step forward and positioning himself right in front of Nigel. “I’m Diego, by the way. If you like Alan enough to hang out with him then you’re going to love me.” He stretched out his arm and offered his hand with a smile and a playful wink.

Nigel stared at him like he was an alien.

Alex was left speechless.

He had known Diego for some months now and right from the start he had noticed that he was the type of person who just flirted with everyone. It was more than just his words, it was the confidence with which he said them and that accompanied his every move. Or at least Alex had thought he knew how Diego looked when he was flirting– there wasn’t a girl he met he didn’t make an advance at, but the way he was looking at Nigel in that moment was nothing like how he had addressed Lisa just a second before. He was devouring him with his eyes, like he had found a rare treasure.

Alex could only stare.

“May I ask what’s your name?”

To his utter shock, Nigel replied. “Noah,” he said in that husky tone Alex loved. He noticed that Diego did, too.

It was horrifying.

“ *Noah* ,” he repeated under his breath. “como en el viejo testamento. The only righteous man, chosen by God.”

Nigel accepted his outstretched hand in a quick but firm shake before letting go and nodding in acknowledgement. "That is correct."

He seemed proud somehow. Even though it wasn't his real name, it was almost like he enjoyed the recognition.

“I'm sorry for not noticing you there sooner. I don't know how I didn't see you. Forgive me, but you're incredibly attractive.” Diego was still smiling, if a bit more shyly, like he was truly taken aback by Nigel's presence.

Alex didn't like it one bit.

"He's my boyfriend," he said and suddenly everything went quiet, or so it felt like.

The wind was still making the leaves on the trees dance and the birds continued to chirp without a care in the world, people kept walking by, talking to each other, the world around them was alive and moving, but the four of them were frozen still.

Diego, as usual, was the first one to react. He wasn't the kind of person that blushed easily, but over the light skin of his cheeks where the stubble didn't cover his face, a faint hint of red was visible. His eyes widened and he took a step back with his hands up, as if he was being arrested or held at gunpoint.

"Wow, okay, my bad." He turned to face Alex with a grimace. "Alan, I had no idea." His eyes landed back on Nigel. "I should have asked, I'm sorry."

Nigel just stared back at him in silence with an unreadable expression. Next to Diego, Lisa cleared her throat.

"Alright, I'm gonna go do something, over there." She pointed at

seemingly nothing to her right. "For no particular reason. I'll be back in a minute." She walked away without another word.

Diego watched her leaving with a desperate expression on his face before turning back to them.

"Look, I didn't mean to offend either of you, I just didn't think-"

"It's fine." Alex cut him off. He put his hands in the pockets of his jeans only to decide against it and crossed them again over his chest. His mouth had gone suddenly dry and he couldn't look directly at Diego *or* Nigel. "You didn't know."

"No, I didn't." Diego chuckled, rubbing the back of his head in a nervous gesture. "I'm usually better at guessing that kind of thing, but I didn't even know you liked men."

He had to hold back the retort, the urge to contradict him. But Diego hadn't said Alex was gay, he only said he liked men, which was true. He swallowed the automatic response, the knee jerk reaction to defend himself.

Against what he was defensive, he wasn't sure.

"Can't say the same thing about Noah here, if you allow me the indiscretion." He cast a sheepish look at Nigel. "I knew right away."

"I don't take offense to it," Nigel replied.

Finally daring to lift his gaze, Alex found Nigel looking back at him with a knowing smile.

He cleared his throat.

"Well, I didn't know about you either," he managed to say.

Diego frowned. "Seriously?" When Alex simply shook his head in confusion, he laughed. "I thought it was obvious, you thought I was straight?"

Alex gave the question some thought. Had he assumed Diego was heterosexual? Surely he'd seen him flirt with every passing woman he encountered, that must've meant something. But again, maybe Diego was like him in a way, maybe he didn't have a strong preference.

"I knew you liked women."

The even louder laughter he received in return made some pedestrians look their way and he shrank further into himself.

"I don't like women!" Diego declared, fortunately not as loud as his laughter had been. "I can't believe this, that was a good one, Cazador, I'm going to remember this."

The confusion and shock hadn't completely faded from his brain when Lisa returned with her hands behind her back and a nervous smile.

"I see you're having fun," she said to Diego, who simply smiled back at her and shook his head. "¿Está todo bien? Or is someone dying today?"

"Todo bien." Diego replied. "I think?" he added looking a little bit uncertain, his eyes going from Nigel to Alex.

Alex gave himself the chance to relax, there was no reason to be angry at Diego, even if there was part of him that felt like jumping at him like a wolf on its prey. Diego was his *friend* , one of the few he had.

He turned to Nigel, finding him relaxed and unbothered, now that the situation had more or less resolved. Nigel nodded at him before saying "Todo bien."

The words were rough, unpolished on Nigel's untrained tongue, but perfectly understandable.

"Well, if you haven't had enough of me yet," Diego said, pulling a couple of small pamphlets from inside his jacket, "There is going to be an exhibit soon. This art gallery is going to be presenting a brand new collection of young talents, a friend of mine among them." He offered the pamphlets to them. They announced in bold red letters the upcoming event just as Diego described it and in smaller print the date and time, which was just a week away. "This is my informal invitation, you don't need to pay for it, this is mostly for the sake of the artists. I won't bore you with the details," he said dismissively with a wave of his hand. "But I thought you might be interested: the theme is religion and history."

Alex looked up at that, his interest sparked.

Diego smiled. "You can *all* come along."

Alex followed his gaze as it landed on Nigel briefly. The playful, flirtatious tone had faded from his voice completely, or as much as it could in someone like him. It was only slightly terrifying to Alex to

realize how much better it made him feel.

"Now, if you excuse me," Diego took a step back, and raised the copy of "Niebla" in front of him. "I have a book to read." He held it with both hands against his chest. "Nos vemos luego, Cazador," he nodded at Alex, the sound of the "Z" buzzing in his ears. "Lisa, Noah."

His eyes lingered on Alex for a second longer before leaving with something like uncertainty. Alex shrugged and rolled his eyes as reassurance. They would talk about it later, he was sure, but for now, he would try his best to let it go.

Lisa said her good-byes shortly after, wishing them a good night and walking in the opposite direction.

The walk back to the apartment was fast paced and quiet, like they couldn't wait to be alone.

"Why does your friend call you “Cazador”?" Nigel asked several hours later, while they were in the bathtub they rarely ever remembered having.

The pale green of the porcelain against the white tiles inspired quietness and peace.

Alex laid back against the wall behind him, his legs tangled with Nigel's, sitting across from him, and sighed before answering.

"He thinks that my last name is Hunter, remember? Hence, cazador."

The soft hum he received in reply was barely audible and had only reached his ears because of the echo in the bathroom, Nigel's voice bouncing off their surroundings. "I hadn't realized that was the word for it in Spanish."

Nigel had his eyes closed and Alex knew that he was completely capable of falling asleep if no one stopped him. It was part of the reason why Alex told him to never take baths by himself.

But only part of it.

"I thought you were smarter than that. Have you lost some brain cells with the heat?" He teased, bumping his right knee against Nigel's.

"That is possible." Nigel lazily blinked his eyes open, and began to slowly sit up until the water came up to his ribs and his legs were

bent.

Before Alex had gotten in, Nigel had put something in the water that had made it look white and milky and it smelled suspiciously like honey. It made Nigel's skin blend in with the liquid, with how pale he was.

“Or, you could also consider that I was too distracted by other matters," Nigel finished saying, and Alex's heart forgot its natural pace for a fraction of a second as he saw him leaning forward.

"Were you now?" Alex smirked, trying as much as he could to stay in control of the situation. It was always a fight for power with them, even in the calmest of situations.

That's why when Nigel sat in the middle of the bathtub, looking at Alex from under his thick , dark lashes, he felt the need to respond.

In a slow, deliberate movement Alex sat up as well, causing some water to spill over the edge of the tub on the floor. They were close, incredibly so, only a breath away from each other.

“I have to ask.” Nigel’s breath touched Alex's cheeks. "Did you take offense that he found me attractive?" Then, after considering him for a second, he added, "Did you feel threatened?"

Nigel was a mean, vile creature. It had been obvious, even to the pigeons in the park, that Alex had felt threatened. There wasn't room for doubt on that and certainly not for someone who knew him as well as Nigel did.

Alex knew this, and yet, he rose to the challenge. "Why would I? I know you're not going anywhere," he asked, not expecting an answer.

Nigel smirked, his hands suddenly emerging from under the water to caress Alex's sides, his fingers gently trailed over his ribs, up and down until they settled at his waist. "Why would you, indeed. I can't think of a reason."

There wasn't anything Alex could do to resist the soft purring of that voice, or the piercing look Nigel was giving him. His hands moved, almost of their own accord, over the edge of the tub until they met Nigel's arms and made their way up over his shoulders, slowly sliding over damp, warm skin to cup his face.

"You enjoyed it, didn't you?" he accused, quietly.

Nigel hummed before saying anything. His eyes closed again for a brief moment. "Which part? Your *friend* being obviously interested in me," he began, now looking at Alex through half lidded eyes. A beast, calmly watching his prey, knowing that once he attacked, it wouldn't be able to escape. "The fact that you had to openly admit to being in a *relationship* with me, or perhaps" –a wicked grin appeared on his face– "knowing that he chose to make an advance at me but not at you."

Alex was positive that a small fire had been set somewhere inside him. Whether he wished to put it out or not was still up for debate.

"You're mad, a lost cause, I can't believe you." He leaned forward, finally falling victim to Nigel's infuriating charm. They met in a soft kiss and he felt Nigel's smile against his own lips. "You're a sick little bastard," Alex breathed with enthusiasm.

When he tried to lean back, Nigel's eager hands pressed against his shoulder blades and pulled him close again. "You're not denying it."

"You don't know anything about Diego, that's just how he is, I'm not interested." He tried to explain, noticing how he sounded defensive even to his own ears.

Truth be told, it had been strangely disappointing to know that Diego was fully capable of being attracted to a man, and yet, after spending time with Alex he had never expressed any interest in him. There was a chance that he had simply not recognized Alex as someone who might reciprocate in any way. After all, why would you take the risk when you're not sure of how it'll be received?

Wasn't that what Alex wanted, anyway? Diego had taken one look at Nigel and he had *known* . Alex didn't want people to know, not like that, not in a way that would make him vulnerable.

Something stung his lower lip and brought him back to reality. He hadn't noticed that Nigel was kissing him again, much more aggressively this time, his teeth having just sunk into the soft tissue of Alex's lip and pulling away just before breaking the skin.

He barely had time to gasp before Nigel was talking again.

"You're right, I don't know anything about Diego. And that might be because you have never talked to me about him." It felt like an accusation, like Alex should be afraid, trying to fix something he didn't know he had done wrong.

His heartbeat resumed its strange, quickened pace.

“Lisa speaks Spanish just as fluently as she does English, you speak it as well and I assume that's the language you use in your day to say life when you're not with me.” Nigel continued speaking as if he was at the start of a monologue, like he wasn't expecting Alex to chime in at any point.

Alex couldn't look away from his blue eyes. He was drowning.

“Diego had no way of knowing what language I would understand, and yet, he chose to speak in English for your benefit. Had you noticed that?”

Alex felt compelled to shake his head, but stopped himself before giving in. “It doesn't mean anything, that's just something people do,” he tried arguing.

Nigel assessed him with calculating eyes. He was tense, Alex noticed when his shoulders suddenly dropped with a deep breath, seemingly satisfied, or perhaps disappointed at Alex's answer.

“You shouldn't care,” Alex rushed to say without thinking. “About Diego or anyone else, they don't matter.”

Not like you, no one matters like you, like us.

That seemed to do the trick, as Nigel leaned down with a pleased smile to rest his forehead on Alex's shoulder with a sigh. Alex closed his eyes, shivering at the feeling of Nigel's breath on his sensitive skin.

“I know,” was all that Nigel said.

They didn't talk any more about Diego after that.

“You're not gonna offer me some coffee or something?” Lisa walked inside the apartment, dark green backpack over her shoulder and her black boots stepping onto the rug at the entrance.

Alex dropped the set of keys on the piano with more force than he'd intended and checked the surface of the lid just to make sure he hadn't accidentally scratched it. “I don't share my fortune,” he replied, turning to Lisa once he was satisfied with his examination. The piano was safe from harm and so was he from Nigel's wrath.

“You're a lousy host, Alan.”

He turned to her and saw her looking at the piano with fascinated eyes.

“As far as I recall, you invited yourself over, so I don't owe you the courtesy.”

Bringing Lisa to the apartment had felt like a calculated risk, one he had mused over for longer than probably any normal person would have. But Alex was not familiar with normality and he did things his own way.

It should be fine, no reason to freak out. It wasn't like they had anything that screamed *“I've murdered people”* just laying around.

He saw Lisa's eyes land on the raven on the shelf and suddenly he wasn't so sure anymore.

“Take your shoes off and let's get this over with,” he said, a tad too harshly.

Lisa didn't seem to notice the difference.

“Do I have to?” she asked with clear annoyance at Alex's request but was already unclasping the big, golden buckle on the side of her left boot.

“They're filthy and I'm not cleaning up after you.”

She scoffed in response and removed both of her boots under Alex's exasperated look. Once she had taken them off, he led her into the studio and she followed on stocking feet.

Opening the door to the spare room that could now only be described as Nigel's lair, Alex continued to have doubts.

Said doubts were only increased by Lisa, whistling and looking impressed at Nigel's drawings covering the walls.

“Dios mío.” She laughed, standing in the middle of the room. “Piano in the living room, weird art on the wall, you're even more artsy than I thought”.

Her mocking tone didn't escape his notice.

“That's Nigel, not me,” he retorted and knelt down in front of the closet to open the bottom drawer. “Here, you should find what you were looking for.”

Lisa turned to face him and he could see the delight in her eyes at seeing the contents of the drawer. She dropped the backpack on the ground unceremoniously and sat down on the floor next to him.

“You have so many books in here! Oh my god, this is going to take a while.”

It wasn't that many, really. There were, in fact, around 50 different books in that one drawer. Alex had counted them. And those were only the ones he was willing to let someone else borrow. His and Nigel's personal collection was much larger and increasing with each passing day.

They would probably have to let go of some of them if they wanted to move somewhere else. The thought wasn't as disturbing to him as he knew it was for Nigel.

“It better not, I don't have all the time in the world to babysit you.” He stood up to watch over Lisa as she began looking through the piled books and reading the titles.

“Do you have anything in Spanish?” she asked, seeming to ignore Alex's comment.

“Yeah, but not much.”

Feeling agitated and fairly bored he ended up making both of them some coffee and then leaned against the desk, hearing but not listening to Lisa's one minute reviews of each book that she found, including the ones she claimed to not have ever read or heard of.

He began to regret agreeing to let her come over as he realized that this was indeed–as she had put it–going to take a while.

On the other hand, it gave him time to ponder some things that had been at the back of his mind, bothering him without fully making themselves known, like static on a radio in the neighbors apartment, an unnerving sound that you can't even stand up to turn off.

It had been a couple of weeks since he had stayed in that room for longer than a minute. He eyed the last additions to Nigel's art portfolio, a reminder of the reason for his aversion.

They hadn't talked about it again, he and Nigel; he didn't know what to say anyway.

It wasn't the fact that they had known each other before, that was something that you could chalk up to coincidence, there was nothing incredibly special about it–not in Alex's opinion at least.

But the way Nigel had talked about it, like a fever dream filled with inconsistencies and blank spaces, the terrifying implications that it brought with it. *That* had freaked Alex out.

Things had been going so well for a long while, Nigel was still Nigel and Alex was still Alex, so they thought they wouldn't talk about things and then they would fight again. But none of that ever made him feel scared or threatened; if anything, the fights were invigorating.

It was the way Alex would still freeze whenever he got home and couldn't immediately find Nigel, or how he would sometimes find him staring into nothingness with unseeing blue eyes, lost to the world.

The fact that every time they were starting to feel safe, something happened that made Alex angry enough to punch someone, or that would upset Nigel enough to remind him why he liked the idea of death so much.

Alex's eyes were drawn to Lisa's hand that was carelessly dropping another book on the small pile she had been building with the ones she meant to take with her. The new addition fell right on top of “The Da Vinci Code”, a small cloud of dust coming from the collision. The name of the book was “Madness Explained: Psychosis and Human Nature,” and he didn't remember if he had read it or not, which probably meant that he hadn't.

“I didn't know you liked that kind of thing.”

“What kind of thing?” Lisa asked without looking up from the drawer.

“Psychology, or psychiatry, I suppose.” Alex noticed the way her shoulders tensed slightly following his words, but her voice didn't give away any sign of being uncomfortable with the conversation.

“I like reading some stuff here and there. What? Just because I'm not university smart like you, I can't like science stuff?” She turned to look at him over her shoulder with teasing eyes and a grin.

Alex rolled his eyes.

“Don’t put words in my mouth.”

Lisa turned back to rummaging through the books without adding anything else for a minute or so. The book remained on the top of the pile and Alex couldn't take his eyes off of it.

“Can I tell you something?”

Lisa's sudden question took him off guard less than the hesitancy in her voice did. Without giving himself too much time to consider it, he nodded in response before realizing that she wasn't looking at him.

“Sure,” he said.

“My brother was crazy.” She laughed with no humour, shaking her head and turning halfway in Alex's direction. “Actually, he was *really* crazy, serial killer type of shit, if you know what I mean.”

Alex's heart skipped a beat.

“But he wasn't a serial killer, not really, at least that we know of. But you know, he definitely had it in him, I think.” She had her legs crossed, her elbows supported on her knees while she fidgeted with the leather bracelets on her left wrist.

“How so?” Alex asked quietly, not taking his eyes off from Lisa.

She turned to him with a frown, suddenly looking very serious.

“Well, he tried to kill my mom, so I would say the murderous urges were confirmed.”

In the back of his mind he knew that he was probably meant to say something like *I'm sorry* or *that sounds awful, I can't imagine going through that* , try to be sympathetic at least. But he didn't necessarily care about that and there was a buzzing sound starting to ring in his ears that didn't let him think.

“How?” he asked instead.

“Huh?” Lisa seemed confused for a second and Alex wondered if he had gone too far, if she could suddenly see through the persona he had carefully created when he'd decided to become Alan Hunter, the normal bartender. His fears soon dissipated when she immediately recovered. “Oh, well he had been making her life a living hell for *years* . It sucked, not just because she's my mom, but because I was also living with them. But I guess one day he just flipped the switch, something went off inside his fucked up brain and, boom!” She

dramatically opened her arms around her and then let them drop on her thighs. “He grabbed a gun and shot her in the back. She didn't die, obviously, that's why I said *tried* ,” she hurried to say, as if she was trying to reassure him.

As if he was supposed to care.

“But she's paralyzed now, that's why I still live with her.” She dropped her eyes back to the book with a sigh.

Alex truly didn't know what to say. Lisa had always seemed so cheerful and carefree. He hadn't considered that other people's lives might've also been filled with violence, not just his.

“So yeah, I like reading these stupid books. It's lame but I like thinking that maybe if I learn enough I'll understand what the fuck was wrong with him.” She smiled, shaking her head and making a dismissive gesture at him. “No such luck yet though. My mom says he was always a freak and as far as I can remember he was at least mean. Liked burning shit and drowning animals. That kind of stuff. It still makes no sense to me.”

“What happened to him?” Without realizing it, he had leaned forward and was now a few steps closer to Lisa. The curiosity he felt for this stranger's story had him wanting to know more and more about it. He hoped that Lisa would take it as concern over her and her mother's safety.

“Oh, he's dead, offed himself like 10 minutes after he shot mom.”

The words made his heart sink.

“I'm sorry.”

“Thanks, I guess.”

Don't be grateful, I don't really mean it. Not in the way you think.

They went back to being quiet for a second before he dared to speak again.

“I used to like reading about that kind of thing, but I haven't in a while.”

“Why is that?”

“I don't know.”

Because I'm scared of what I'll find. I don't want to know anymore.

“I guess I've just been busy with school and all that.”

“You don't need to take psychology to get that degree of yours?” Lisa was back to looking at the remaining books, most of them had already been examined so she was almost done.

“I don't know, not yet, at least,” he said, his mind already starting to wander off again.

His eyes rose from the back of Lisa's neck to a drawing attached to the door of the closet, just a meter or so over her head.

Nigel had finished a few days earlier, he had seen him working on it, hunched over his desk for hours. It was a dark, humanoid figure with pointy edges that appeared to be lying down on the floor with its arms around itself.

He'd noticed that Nigel had remade the figure’s face multiple times. It now had only a set of piercing blue eyes that stared at nothing.

It always shocked Alex how Nigel was so good at making realistic sketches of real things: a portrait, an animal, a human heart. And yet, some of his drawings were odd looking silhouettes and overly simplistic images that lacked logic and detail.

He didn't know what it meant.

He didn't know what it meant that he wasn't afraid, but fascinated instead.

“Okay, I think I'm done,” Lisa said, starting to pack the books inside her backpack.

Before he could say anything in response, he felt his cell phone vibrating inside his pocket.

When he took it out it was Nigel's contact on the screen.

It immediately made him nervous. Nigel never called.

He picked up the call, moving the phone to his ear.

“Hello?”

“Jack,” came the voice on the other side.

“Alarm bells started ringing inside Alex's head.

“What's the matter?” he asked, barely catching himself before saying his name. Lisa raised an eyebrow at him. He hadn't noticed her standing up.

“You need to come here. We have a problem.”

Chapter End Notes

Happy 2024!
So, yeah, it's been a while, like 6 months or something. I had a couple of health situations and also, I had to write a thesis. Good news is: I got my degree!
Anyway, I hope someone's still out there waiting for this story to be updated. Thank you all for the kind comments and the ongoing support.
I've done some editing to the formating on this story to hopefully make it more accessible. If anyone here is by chance using a voice reader or something like that please don't be shy and let me know how I can make my chapters more accesible and easy to read.
Also, check it out, there's a new chapter count situation going on 👀 we're almost at the end.

No one listens to the dead

Chapter Summary

> Decisions are made, once again lives are changed.

Chapter Notes

> Content Warnings for this chapter: Semi graphic descriptions of violence, blood and injury. Canon typical perverse logic. They're not morally gray, they're as dark as it gets and have no remorse about it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Asking Lisa to let him borrow her car, rushing both of them out of the apartment, and taking off by himself had been a quick string of automatic responses that barely registered in Alex's brain over the loud beating of his own heart.

Nigel had given no details, no warnings for what to expect when he got there, just an address and the urgent request for Alex to meet him and tell no one where he was going. Not that Alex even *knew* where he was going.

The place he was headed seemed to be in the middle of nowhere, even though it was only about two kilometers away from Nigel's workplace.

Alex parked the car on the side of the empty road and walked into a field behind a thin wall of black locust trees. He didn't see anything but dry weeds at first as he looked around the overgrown grass and scattered trees. It must've been the worry making his brain work slower because once he let himself take a breath of fresh air he was able to see the small, weathered yellow shed ahead of him, partly obscured by the bare branches of a tall Judas tree that was leaning against the roof.

Nigel stood at the door, facing him as Alex approached him with quick steps.

"What's going on? What is this place?" he immediately asked in a hoarse voice, every breath coming fast and short.

He studied Nigel's face for answers; he looked composed and significantly less agitated than Alex was feeling.

“We have been found.”

If Alex had thought that he could not be any more distressed, he had been wrong.

“What the hell does that mean? Found how? By whom?” He didn’t want to raise his voice even in the isolated field. The idea that they were possibly in danger made him want to be as quiet as possible. Still, the urge to do something, to find answers and figure out a way to resolve the situation was threatening to make him lose what little composure he had left.

“There was a woman at the pharmacy, she recognized us,” Nigel explained, eyes intently set on him, speaking slowly as if what he was saying was something very complex and he feared that Alex might not understand. “I could *not* let her go,” he said emphatically, even though Alex hadn’t argued.

“Nigel, what did you do?” This time the reason behind the low volume of his voice wasn’t fear of being heard, but more from knowing the answer to the question.

Nigel’s eyes widened slightly and he rushed to clarify. “Nothing yet, she’s inside.” He gestured behind him to the door without turning away from Alex. “I was waiting for you,” he added after a moment.

Alex looked over Nigel’s shoulders and swallowed, readying himself for what was behind the door.

“Alright, let me see.”

There was nothing that could have prepared him for what was waiting inside the shed. No amount of anticipation and imaginary scenarios were enough to make the scene in front of him any easier to take in.

Turning left from the door, at the back of the single room that made the entire shed, there was a woman kneeling on the floor in an awkward position. Her hands were behind her back, presumably tied up, and her mouth was muzzled with a green rag. Her short, straight blonde hair looked disheveled and her light gray eyes were staring at the two of them, wild and scared.

Alex stood there, processing what he was seeing for what felt like an eternity.

He had the sudden certainty that his life was once again about to

change abruptly.

“Fucking hell, Nigel.”

The door closed and Nigel walked past him towards the woman. Her eyes followed his movements fearfully, and she emitted a faint distressed whine when he went to stand next to her.

Alex started pacing within the limited space, his mind racing a mile a minute.

“Tell me what happened, because I need to make sense of this or I swear to God, I’ll lose my mind,” he demanded, way past the point of pretending to be anything but desperate.

In his peripheral view, he saw Nigel nodding.

“I finished my shift and I was walking back to the apartment but I had a… *feeling* that someone was watching me. She was following me, but she wasn’t subtle.”

Alex fully turned to him and saw Nigel looking down at the woman. She was facing away from him with her eyes tightly closed and her shoulders up to her ears in a defensive posture.

“I didn’t know what her intentions were, so I lured her as far away from the town as possible without walking too far. I didn’t want her to know where we lived.”

“That was stupidly reckless, you could have been assaulted!” Alex raised his voice, patience running out by the minute.

Nigel simply chuckled. It only managed to make him angrier.

“You think that’s funny?”

“Considering the current situation? Incredibly,” Nigel countered, quickly turning to address Alex with a disbelieving expression.

Maybe he had a point.

“Regardless,” Nigel continued after a moment. “Once we were alone on the street I let her approach me. She had heard about us; she came here from England as well and she saw the news.”

He laughed once before continuing. Alex frowned at him.

“She had this *nonsensical* theory about what happened, that you had *kidnapped me* . Can you believe it?” He sounded incredibly amused, shaking his head with a chuckle.

Alex’s eyes went back to the woman who was now looking at him, still hunched over herself.

“So you did what, attacked her?” he asked in disbelief. When Nigel simply shrugged, he had to keep pressing. “How did you get her in here?”

“I played along for a moment, and asked her to talk somewhere more private. As soon as she turned, I just…” Nigel gestured vaguely at the woman. “Well, she didn’t see it coming, and I’m always prepared. It didn’t matter if she made some noise before I got her away. There was no one there to help.”

Alex didn’t know if Nigel’s explanation was meant to make things any clearer for him. He still didn’t understand anything.

He looked away from the woman’s pitiful eyes to assess his surroundings. The room was poorly illuminated with only a small window on the same wall the woman was partially leaning against, just a meter above her head. With the sun setting outside, the half lidded blinds let little to no light into the room, and the rest was provided by a bare bulb precariously hanging from the ceiling. There was a table at the back cluttered with empty glass flasks and cardboard boxes. That seemed to be most of what was filling the place: boxes and dirty blankets.

“What is this place?”

“Originally? Who knows, most likely someone’s storage. Now it's mine,” Nigel said casually, as if that made any sense.

Alex didn’t think there was any point in asking when he’d found it and why he needed it. That was simply what Nigel did, apparently; he kept secrets and hid in odd places.

“What are we going to do with her?” he asked instead, even though he hardly considered it to be a safer subject. It was at least more urgent.

Nigel frowned at him. “We can’t let her go, that much is obvious.”

“What do you suggest we do then, kill her?” He meant it as a joke.

Nigel's reply came fast and cold. "Naturally."

The woman whined and started fidgeting against the bindings.

"For fuck's sake, Nigel, you can't possibly be serious!" He was about to lose his mind, once and for all; Alex Forbes was going to go completely and irrevocably crazy.

"How else do you expect us to solve this situation?" Nigel argued, raising his voice. "She knows who we are, do you truly believe we can simply let her walk out of here with that information?"

Alex stared at him, not knowing what to say. He knew Nigel was right, that was the worst part. They had already gotten to this point and he couldn't think of any way they could get out of their current predicament without removing this woman from the equation.

She knew too much.

"Are you going to let her ruin everything that you've built for yourself?" Nigel continued, eyes focused on him from across the room.

Alex considered for a moment that maybe Nigel *was* desperate, not nearly as calm and cold as he had seemed a moment before.

"Everything that we worked for, what we've endured to get here, all thrown out the window because we couldn't do one simple thing. Do you want to sacrifice your plans only to spare a stranger's life?"

The answer should have been simple enough. When had he ever been selfless? Since when did he care? She was an obstacle they had to eliminate. There should be no conflict, and yet. How much would it cost them to actually do it? This was the kind of thing that could change everything, and Alex didn't know if he was willing to take the risk.

And then Nigel had to go and make everything worse. "Do you want to sacrifice the life you promised me?"

It was deeply unfair.

Alex's vision clouded.

"Fuck," Alex mused to himself, and then again, significantly louder. "*Fuck!* " He looked away from Nigel, trying to catch his breath.

"Just, I need to fucking think, alright?" He looked at the terrified

woman once more. “Let me talk to her, I need to know who she is, find out what she knows exactly. We don’t know if she’s told anyone else.”

Nigel looked at him with apprehension. “She’s a customer at Ortega’s, her name is Alison. I know who she is, she’s always late on her payments and tries to get things for free.”

“Well, that doesn’t tell me anything, so just leave me alone with her for a minute.” When he saw that Nigel was about to argue, he interrupted him. “I can’t focus with you here. Don’t you trust me to make decisions? Weren’t you waiting for me to make the final call on this?”

He was playing dirty, he was aware. But who would question his methods, especially when it seemed to be enough to convince Nigel?

Alex felt like he had been holding his breath until the moment he was finally left alone with their hostage, after Nigel regarded her with a serious look and left, closing the door behind him.

Silence fell over the room.

Hesitantly, Alex let his eyes meet the woman's and found them as scared as they had been before. He sighed, still not fully accepting their situation but resigned to the role he had in it.

He walked the couple steps towards her, noting how she flinched, and stood in front of her.

Looking around he noticed that there was a small stool under the work table and he pulled it towards him to sit.

Hunched over himself and leaning forward with his elbows pressing right above his knees, he looked at her for a moment.

She stared back, shaking in fear.

There was no way out of this now.

“Fuck, alright,” he sighed. “Alison.” The woman jumped at her name. “I will be honest with you, right now you're a huge inconvenience,” he began as calmly as possible. “I'm going to remove the rag from your mouth so we can talk.”

Her eyes watched him on high alert.

“Nigel has already made up his mind that you need to die, but I haven't decided yet. You have a chance here, don't waste it.” Alex pointed at her. “If you even try to scream, *just once* , I will have to agree with him. There is no one around this area, it's not worth it. Do I make myself clear?”

She quickly nodded, her wild eyes not looking away from him for a second.

Momentarily satisfied, he leaned forward and stood over her to untie the rag behind her head. Shortly after, the knot was free and Alex threw it aside.

The woman slumped forward and coughed several times before letting out a shaky breath that sounded more like a sob. “Please, don't let him kill me.”

Her voice was hoarse and raspy. Alex had a suspicion that it had less to do with the way Nigel had gagged her and more with years of chain-smoking. The familiar accent caught him off guard, despite already knowing she was from England.

“Don't think about him. You and I are having a conversation,” he said with a tight smile.

For the first time since he'd entered the room she looked away from Alex, nervously eyeing their surroundings.

“I’ve been told that you know who we are, is that right?”

Alison's eyes met his once again, and just watched him for a second. She bit her lips before responding.

“I heard about what you did, back in Leeds. I saw it on the news.”

Alex raised an eyebrow.

“And what was that? What do you think we did?”

“That girl, they said you killed her.” She looked behind him in the direction of the door. “And then you two disappeared, that's what I heard.”

He knew she was exaggerating. No official source had stated that he *or* Nigel had been responsible for Susan's death. He would have known if they had. There was no real evidence of their involvement, all they

could do was name Alex a person of interest.

“And what do you think happened?”

When he received no answer from her, her eyes still looking over his shoulder, he lifted his hand and, softly but firmly, turned her face in his direction.

“Alison.”

She directed her attention back at him.

“What do you think happened?” he insisted.

She took a deep breath.

“I thought it was you that did it.”

“You thought we killed her?”

“No, I mean,” she bit her lip. “I thought it was *you* .”

Alex blinked once, and then once again. He wasn't so much surprised by her answer as he was curious about her reasoning. That was until she explained herself.

“I assumed that the other boy with you must've been dead too, until I saw him at the chemist. I didn't recognize him at first but I knew he looked familiar. When I saw the two of you together, it just clicked.”

Alex struggled with her reasoning, spinning the words around until they made even less sense. He shook his head.

“Why would he be dead?”

She blinked at him with her wide gray eyes and then said, as if it was the most natural thing in the world, “Well, if you killed the girl, why not him too?”

He let out a startled, humorless laugh. “Right, why not, indeed.”

“I-” She gasped and then swallowed. Alex noticed her breath starting to come in shorter intervals, as if her lungs were struggling to get the air in and out. He wondered if she was about to hyperventilate.

Maybe they wouldn't have to kill her at all.

“I don't know what you want from me. I just wanted to help him, I swear.”

Her pleading tone did nothing but annoy him.

“Help him? You're joking,” he deadpanned.

She closed her eyes, shaking her head and taking a deep breath, not saying anything else.

He rolled his eyes and stood up and started pacing the room again.

“Can you tell me what were you supposed to help him with? Huh? What did you think was happening?”

“I don't know!” Alison whisper-yelled.

Their eyes met again.

“I figured you were controlling him, holding him against his will.”

Alex wanted to laugh. It was such an absurd concept. He didn't understand how someone could ever take a look at Nigel and think he could be forced to do anything he didn't want. That he could be *controlled* by anyone else.

Of course, he thought, there was a chance that his judgment was clouded. He was biased after all.

He sat back down, the old stool creaking under him.

“That stupid attempt at a good deed is going to cost you, Alison. Because you got it all wrong.”

She was so, *so* incredibly wrong. It was a reminder of how little people understood about him and Nigel. No one could ever imagine what it was like. Alex had never thought someone could hear about them and assume it was all him: Alex Forbes, murderer and kidnapper, and Nigel just a poor, helpless victim. What a joke.

“I know that now,” Alison whispered. “It's not you that's doing all of this, it's him, isn't it?”

He huffed.

“Stop now while you can, you don't know what you're talking about.”

Her breathing had calmed, she was looking at him intently. “You don't have to do what he wants, Alex.”

He had read enough about forensic psychology to know that she was most likely attempting to gain his sympathy, establishing rapport and all that. It wouldn't work though, not with him, not with everything that was at stake.

The realization startled him. He was only fooling himself if he thought they would be able to let her go. At the end of the day, Nigel was right, she knew too much and they couldn't afford to lose everything.

He could, however, play along for a while.

He leaned back against the old desk behind him.

“Why don't you tell me more about yourself, Alison. What are you doing in Spain?”

She eyed him apprehensively before answering.

Take the bait . Just do it.

“Same as you, I suppose,” she muttered.

“And what's that?”

“Running.”

He smirked. “Well, *we* killed someone, what's your excuse?”

Silence was all he got for a moment. She twitched on her knees. Alex knew she was trying to mess with her bindings and by the way she would wince from time to time it was clear that she wasn't accomplishing much, other than hurting herself.

“My little sister died,” she admitted eventually.

“I'm sorry to hear that,” he said, almost automatically. A well practiced reply, according to what was expected of him as a civilized individual.

“Her boyfriend was a brute,” she continued. “I didn't warn her enough about him, I thought she was too stubborn to listen. One day he decided he'd had enough and strangled her.” Her eyes misted over with each word. “I suppose I killed her, too, in a way. I couldn't stand to be there anymore, so I ran.”

Alex considered her story very carefully. To him, it was pretty clear what was going on. She had been a victim of her own demons, seeing Nigel and thinking he was someone that needed saving. He suspected Alison would've drawn that conclusion regardless of the situation; she needed to make amends with herself, and that would be her curse.

“Do you have anyone else?”

She shook her head solemnly. “No, she was all I had left.”

No family then, he noted, that made things easier.

“What about friends? Are you seeing anyone here?”

That seemed to be too blunt of a question. Alison frowned at him with suspicion. “I think I'm done talking with you,” she declared with finality, the vulnerability from a moment ago gone and locked away behind a defensive mask.

She wasn't as dumb as he'd hoped.

He tried to come up with something, *anything,* that could get her back to talking. It shouldn't be too difficult, she was in desperate need of companionship, someone to talk to, someone to share her feelings with.

Before he could say anything else, he heard the door open behind him. Alison startled and he turned back.

Nigel walked in, looking bored and partially annoyed.

“Are we done?” he asked impatiently.

“No,” Alex turned back to Alison with a grin. “Me and Ali are getting to know each other. Aren't we?”

She didn't respond. Her eyes kept switching from Nigel to him.

“There's no point in this, you know what we have to do,” Nigel insisted.

Alex stood from the creaking stool with a sigh and walked away from their unwilling guest towards him. Now that he was paying closer attention, he could see the apprehension in Nigel's face more clearly. His lips were chapped again, something that hadn't been happening as much recently.

Alex had made fun of him for it, but that natural balm he was using had done wonders for Nigel's lips.

His shoulders were tense and his hair looked disheveled. But what truly worried Alex was the way his hands were starting to shake. The slight tremors, the quick, almost imperceptible movements of his slim fingers as he stood there, staring daggers at Alison–that's what made Alex straighten up his shoulders in something akin to fear.

“Hey,” he whispered once he was close enough for Nigel to hear it. “What are you thinking?”

Nigel didn't say anything and simply continued to watch Alison. Alex could only imagine the emotional effect it was having on her to have his creepy eyes so fixated on her.

“Don't do that, you're freaking me out,” he snapped, standing in Nigel's line of vision in the hopes of getting his attention.

With nowhere else to look, their eyes finally met. “Why are you delaying this, Jack? She's a threat to us.”

A shiver went down Alex's spine.

“Don't call me that,” he snapped.

The response came as something uncontrollable, something he couldn't have predicted or stopped even if he'd wanted to.

Had it really been so long since he'd called him Jack? It simultaneously felt like yesterday and a lifetime ago.

Nigel's eyes widened for a fraction of a second and the hurt in that look would've gone unnoticed if Alex didn't know him so well, if he weren't so attuned to his every facial expression.

“I don't like it when you call me that,” Alex tried to explain. “It feels like you're talking to someone else, like this ‘Jack’ isn't me.”

It was a thought that he'd had before, though less often in the past year or so. At that moment it was as if *Jack* was the symbolic representation of everything Nigel expected from him. The one he went to when things got complicated, when his mind went to (even more than usual) dark places. He himself had started to associate it with things going wrong, a tell-tale sign that he was about to lose control.

“Jack,” Nigel said in that sweet, dangerous velvety voice that made Alex's insides turn to mush and his brain stop functioning correctly. He could only close his eyes in preparation for what was to come. “You have to know that it's you, it has *always* been you.”

Soft cold hands framed his cheeks, the gentle caress of Nigel's thumbs under his eyes made him look up again. It was hard to describe, even to himself, the way those blue eyes made everything go away for a moment. Nigel was so intense, he could say so much with only his eyes.

“You know what our duty here is, we can't let a minor inconvenience like this ruin everything.” His hands didn't seem to be shaking anymore, not while they were touching Alex. “Let me do it,” he murmured, hypnotically, tearing away at what little was left of Alex's conviction. “Let me do what I'm best at, I want to be useful. I am only waiting for your command, Jack.”

It made sense, why wouldn't he let Nigel kill Alison? Why try so hard to let her live? They had gotten away with it once, why not do it again?

“What if it only makes it worse?”

Because that was the thing, wasn't it? Yes, they had already done it once and gotten away with it, so far at least–he had to remind himself to never be too confident. But it had cost him everything he had until that moment. He had to leave his entire life behind, and at the end of the day he had accepted that.

But to lose everything *now* ? The life he was building for himself? The prospect didn't seem so appealing.

Apparently it wasn't as clear to Nigel, who tilted his head to the side with a raised brow. His hands started to pull away from Alex. “That's not possible,” he said with certainty.

Alex huffed. “Is it not? What if we have to run? Again?”

I hate running. I hate having to look over my shoulder. I don't want this choice taken away from me.

Nigel shook his head in denial. “It isn't like the last time, I wasn't–” He stopped himself before sighing. “It *is* different now.”

I'm planning to stay this time, is what Alex assumed he meant.

It kept dawning on him how much was at stake.

He held onto Nigel's wrists, maintaining contact with him, not letting Nigel put any distance between them.

The last time, Nigel hadn't been planning to survive, he hadn't cared about the after. It hadn't been so evident to Alex at the time, but it was now.

It was still too soon to think about that. He couldn't envision a time when it wouldn't be too soon for him to think about what they had been so close to losing.

He understood that it was different, but he had to be sure.

Alex was too aware of Alison only a few meters behind them. He couldn't lean in and kiss Nigel, manipulate him the way he had done to Alex by calling him " *Jack* ". It felt like he was always at a disadvantage. Nigel kept looking intently at him and Alex knew he had already lost the argument, any fight left in him was through mere inertia.

Still, under the will-crushing power of those blue eyes, he tried.

“Leave me alone with her a while longer.”

“I won't leave this room again,” Nigel argued immediately, like the petulant child he was.

“Fine,” Alex conceded just as quickly. “You don't have to leave, just-stay over here while I talk to her.” He pleaded urgently and then added in a whisper, “You can handle the rest afterwards.”

That seemed to be good enough for Nigel, as he silently walked away, his hands reluctantly parting from Alex's touch.

Walking back towards Alison only took a couple of seconds but it felt like a million years during which he repeatedly told himself that it would be alright.

“Alison,” he started, sitting back down to look at her. “I can see that you're a good person, you just wanted to help Nigel, isn't that right?”

Alison nodded. He noted how much more tired she looked with each passing minute. The position she was in couldn't be comfortable at all, knees on the floor with her hands tied behind her back and slumped

forward. Her forehead was shiny with sweat and she kept fidgeting in her spot.

“You thought he was in trouble, that I was controlling him somehow. You wanted to give him a way out.” Alex looked at her as he carefully leaned forward, shaking his head with feigned sympathy. He made sure their eyes were firmly locked before he finished the sentence. “The way you couldn't for your sister.”

Expectedly her eyes, which had already been watery and slightly red rimmed, let slip the first tears.

“I just wanted to help him, I thought you were a monster,” she choked out. “I was wrong,” she continued before Alex could say anything, catching him by surprise. “You're not the monster.” She looked behind Alex. “It's him.”

“I already told you to stop with that,” he warned her, as calmly as he could. “Don't think about that. Just tell me, how were you planning to help? Did you tell anyone else?”

She didn't respond, continuing to look behind him.

Well, at least I tried.

When he looked back Nigel was already there, standing behind him with a cold death glare directed at their hostage.

Alex noted the small vintage paper knife in his right hand and the way Alison was squirming.

Nigel took his eyes off her for only a second to look at him, and with that Alex knew what he was asking for: permission.

Resigned, he nodded, not finding any reason not to.

That was all it took for Nigel to surge towards Alison with a fluid motion.

Everything changed after that.

There was a quick, terrified yell before it was muffled behind Nigel's left hand.

Then there was movement, too quick and unexpected for Alex to register.

All he knew was that suddenly Alison was on top of Nigel who was now lying back on the floor next to him. Her hands had been freed somehow, probably while they hadn't been looking.

Hands that were now around Nigel's neck as he was quickly moving to push her away.

Alex couldn't wait, not anymore.

Without thinking about it, he launched himself at Alison, hitting her in the nose with his elbow and hearing a crack and a wet, angry snort from her.

She slumped back and away from Nigel. The dagger had fallen to the floor beside Alex and he picked it up before she could even think about reaching for it.

“Fuck,” she cursed. “You’re just as horrible as him.”

Alex could see that she was trying to pick herself up but her legs were faltering. He didn't miss the chance.

She was pinned under him in a second, the dagger to her neck.

It was quick, Alex didn't think too much about it. The movement of his hand felt like second nature as the sharpened blade sliced the pale skin of her throat.

Human skin was both thicker and softer than he'd thought it would be.

The blood spilled everywhere. He could feel it pouring over his left hand where it pressed against the base of Alison's throat.

Overall, he was calm, his heart wasn't racing. If anything, the second he could see red staining everything and hear the wet, choked last breaths coming from the dying body under him, he knew he had nothing to worry about.

“No,” he said. The wide, desperate gray eyes of Alison stared back at him. “I am much worse.”

She didn't last long after that. He watched the life drain out of her as she left this world. He wondered if this is what Nigel had done to Susan, if he watched her walk the line between the dead and the living until she joined the former.

Maybe he should ask him about it sometime, now that they had the shared experience.

He looked next to him where Nigel lay and was met with a startled, almost awed look on his face. Alex could see there were some splatters of blood on him as well.

It was surprising how far blood could reach.

“Are you alright?” He stood up, reaching with his hand to help Nigel stand up.

Only then did Alex realize his mistake as the blood immediately tainted Nigel's pale porcelain fingers.

Nigel didn't seem to mind though. Intead, he let himself be pulled up by Alex and then held on tight to his hand.

Alex was suddenly taken aback by the adoration in Nigel's eyes. In his shock, the gasp that left his mouth was cut short by the force of Nigel's lips on his, kissing him violently, like he wanted to consume him or be consumed, whatever came first.

Alex let it happen, gripping the dagger in one hand and softly pulling Nigel's hair with the other, cupping the back of his head, pulling him closer.

He thought it was pure bliss as it was, then Nigel pulled back slightly and said something Alex wasn't expecting.

“I love you.” His voice, deep and hoarse, whispered against Alex's lips.

Alex staggered on his feet.

Nigel's breath was coming in short gasps and his eyes were tightly closed. But there was no hesitation in his words, no trembling of his hands where they gripped Alex's waist.

Alex watched him perplexed. When Nigel leaned forward to press his forehead against his cheek, it was Alex's turn to close his eyes, almost not believing what he’d heard.

“I *love* you,” Nigel repeated. Alex's soul was reassured. “No one will ever take you away from me. We are bound forever, do you hear me? We are *never* to be parted.”

Alex breathed in the scent of honey and dust and blood and felt a rush

of absolute and utter *peace* wash over him.

“Never,” he whispered back. And he meant it as a promise.

Later, when it was dark outside and the crickets were the only thing that could be heard over the crackling sparks of fire, and after a first attempt to clean the shed that would most likely require a second, more thorough effort, they watched Alison's body parts burn to ashes.

As the flames did their job, surrounded by trees and dead grass, the whole scene gave Alex a feeling of déjà vu.

When the fire died down near midnight, Alex looked over at Nigel. There was ash on his cheek and he looked tired. Alex was sure he didn't look much better himself.

“Alright,” he sighed, catching Nigel's attention. “Let's sort this out. I reckon we still have that art exhibit to attend.”

Chapter End Notes

insert gif of Jacob Black running where the hell have you been, loca??
Anyways, almost done with this story, hope you're still around.
The paper knife described in this chapter is based on a real life small dagger/letter opener (the exact category is still up for debate) I had when I was little. It had a steel blade and was easily sharpened. I was made aware by GrandMoffTisper that usually these have a dull blade and you can't actually slit anyone's throat with one, however, even though I never attempted to kill anyone with it, mine definitely could. I don't know how it ended up in my house, but it is proof that they exist out there, somewhere. And I trust Nigel to have one.
The next and final chapter (whenever that comes) will be sort of an epilogue and it will take place a while after the events of this one.
Thanks to everyone that's been reading from the beginning, anyone that has stuck around and waited for an update and to all the people that just discovered this story.
And huge thanks to my beta GrandMoffTisper, this chapter has been planned for over a year and I wouldn't have made it this far if it hadn't been for them.

The blood in my mouth and the bitterness in goodbye

Chapter Summary

This is where it ends. Sort of.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Alex had once read in one of the many psychology books he owned that the feeling humans have come to call “love” could not be experienced at all times as the main, most prevalent emotion out of all the ones available to humans. Love was meant to remain dormant instead, quietly but steadily influencing all of their decisions. The reason behind this was simple enough: how could anyone be expected to function properly if they were constantly under the overwhelming haze of *love* –how could you care for yourself or attend to the rest of your needs if the loudest voice in your brain was the one telling you to love, love at all times and without a pause. It was unsustainable.

Alex understood that, in theory.

However, he felt that after that night in November when Nigel had changed the course of both of their lives forever, Alex had been living under a constant haze that clouded his judgment and led him to make rash decisions. But was it love that was leading him? The notion sounded ridiculous to him, but he had always been a cynic. So who was to say.

Regardless, there was one thing that he did not question, not anymore, and that was the fact that his life now was far better than it ever was before. Clouded judgment and dysfunctional brain or not.

It was difficult to feel any nostalgia for a time when he wasn't in charge of his own life and all he had to look forward to was a boring job, probably arguing with less intelligent people all the time. And all for what? To make his father proud? To satisfy the role that he was expected to fulfill in society? He had long since let go of those needs. They belonged to the Alex of 2006. Now, in 2011, having just gotten his degree and about to continue life under yet another name, he had no room for any of that.

Alex had no need for nostalgia, as he laid back in bed, the rim of a glass against his lips and the scent of whiskey soothing him as he watched Nigel sitting with his back to him on the edge of the bed.

Nigel's naked back was quite a sight to behold. The lean muscle of his shoulders led to prominent blades, and in between, the subtle raise of his spine. There was a time when Alex had been able to count each vertebra just by looking, now he took pleasure in doing so with his fingers, his lips, and occasionally his tongue.

In a manner that was very particularly Nigel, he turned his head to the side, as if sensing Alex's attention on him. His eyes were half lidded so Alex could see the way the long lashes cast a shadow over his sharp cheekbones.

The light coming through the window right across from the bed highlighted Nigel's silhouette magnificently, the sun making him look like something holy.

Unfortunately, the sun also made it very easy for Alex to see when a mouthful of smoke left Nigel's lips.

Alex grunted, annoyed.

As the gray cloud dissipated, blue eyes landed on Alex without Nigel fully turning his head in his direction. From his position lying down against the headboard, Alex could see a cigarette in Nigel's right hand, between his thin fingers, dangerously close to the bedsheets under his palm.

It was Alex's cigarette that he held; Nigel was annoyingly good at stealing it from the ashtray when he wasn't looking.

“You are *such* a hypocrite,” Alex spit out. It was nothing but wasted breath on his part, he knew that much by now.

Nigel gave him a sly grin over his shoulder.

“If I do this, it is only because you find it unnerving.”

“Don't think I don't know it.” Alex tried to take a sip of his whiskey and frowned down at the glass, realizing there was none left.

He did not appreciate Nigel's amused snort.

When he looked up with a glare, Alex saw Nigel watching him with a

smile as he lifted his hand to take another drag. The movement was slow and deliberate, and Alex recognized the challenge for what it was and decided to take the bait.

The story of his life.

In a second he put the glass aside on the nightstand and pushed himself forward to sit with his chest against Nigel's back.

He took the cigarette away from Nigel's lips and out of his hand with equally slow movements.

“Don't,” Alex quietly commanded.

Their eyes lingered on each other for a second, he could feel Nigel's breath on his own face, and their arms touched briefly before he managed to turn back to stub out the remainder of the cigarette in the ashtray.

When Alex turned back, Nigel was smiling at him with something that could only be described as fondness. The corner of his lip quirked up and his eyes burned intently into Alex's.

It almost made Alex shiver.

“You get to decide what's good for me, but somehow the same does not apply to you? How does that logic work?” The sound of Nigel's voice vibrated against Alex's chest.

“You're one to question someone else's logic,” Alex huffed in response.

Nigel only hummed back. Whether it was in agreement or consideration, it wasn't clear.

Alex basked in the silence that followed. Madrid was busy and lively in the summer but their room was on the eighth floor of the hotel and the noise from the streets felt distant. They both appreciated the privacy, even if the room itself was remarkably small. They had certainly shared smaller spaces at points in their relationship when they were far less comfortable with doing so, and survived, if barely.

A similar sized room awaited them in Germany as they had planned. Their budget was getting tight but Alex was certain that they would find their way up eventually.

They had been so lucky, so fortunate, thus far. In so many ways. There

was no reason not to be optimistic.

They had gotten away with so much .

Alex leaned forward until his forehead rested on the back of Nigel's right shoulder and sighed deeply.

“Are you tired?” Nigel whispered.

Closing his eyes, Alex contemplated his answer.

He had so much pent up anxiety that he knew wouldn't go away until they were settled in Berlin. Not until he could be sure that all of his school documents had been fully transferred to his new identity and maybe even not until he was taking his first postgrad class. There was so much paperwork involved and his brain hurt just thinking about it.

“Just want to be out of here,” he said eventually.

Nigel hummed again.

“I assumed you would miss your life here, the University, the places you have visited and frequently praised-” There was a pause and Alex felt his lips briefly touch the soft skin of Nigel's back as he took a deep breath against him. “-your *friends* .”

Friendship was a loaded word, one he didn't like using very often and Nigel knew that very well.

Alex, for a long time, would always respond to similar accusations with a basic denial: *“they are not my friends”* . However, this time he noted with no lack of surprise that the knee jerk reaction was becoming easier to fight off with each passing day.

He could admit that the presence of people like Lisa and Diego had become a constant in his life for the past three years. But life was full of changes and transformations and this was hardly the biggest one he'd faced.

“I said my goodbyes, I'm ready for the next step,” he replied with honesty.

It had been complicated, telling them that he was moving away, with no clear indications as to where, knowing that he had to cut ties if he and Nigel wanted to truly disappear again. Alex hated disappearing, but this would be the last time, one last stop before they could keep

going with no fear of being found.

So he'd told Lisa *“I'll reach out when we're settled”* knowing that he was lying. And to Diego *“Nada es para siempre”* because Diego liked it when he was cryptic, and they both refused to say anything too heartfelt.

He had a feeling that both Lisa and Diego knew that it was the end. They hadn't told anyone when exactly they would be leaving, it was easier that way. But they had a plethora of secrets that included several dead people, one that was still entirely too recent, and they had already pushed their luck by staying three whole years.

Similarly to how Alex felt about nostalgia, he had decided that there was no room for regrets either.

“Good,” Nigel said after a beat. He turned on the bed, forcing Alex to lean back to make room for him. Their eyes met again as he spoke. “We are so much closer to being free, truly, this time.”

A rush of unexpected adrenaline overtook Alex. His body tingled with emotion. They could be *free* . They were taking back their lives.

They were unstoppable.

He removed the short distance between them and kissed Nigel, swallowing the gasp he let out before quickly matching Alex's energy. It started out rushed and aggressive, but as Nigel took him in, fully in Alex's arms now, the kiss turned deep and slow, like they were trying to memorize the taste.

Nigel's teeth followed his lips when he broke the kiss and Alex recognized the feral hunger in those blue eyes.

“I can't fucking wait,” Alex said, resolutely.

He should've slept that night, rested as much as he could before heading out. They had at least 20 hours of travel ahead of them till Germany, probably more. Alex was starting to get sick of trains. He was tired of long trips and changing routines. He was anxious and excited and exhausted in advance, and so he could barely sleep.

Nigel looked well rested the next morning because he was the devil

incarnate, but if Alex had to bet he would put money on having to stay awake all by himself for most of the trip. That bastard was going to fall asleep as soon as the train started moving.

“Do you have everything?” Alex asked, standing in front of the mirror over the dresser, running his hands through his hair. It was small, it didn't even fit the full width of his shoulders but it was still somehow bigger than the one in the tiny bathroom.

He heard Nigel sigh from behind him.

“For the millionth time, yes.” He appeared behind Alex and leaned around him to drop something on the small surface of the dresser. “See for yourself,” he said, putting his hands on Alex's shoulders for a moment to lock eyes with him through the mirror, and then promptly walked away.

With one last look at his hair, Alex finally turned his eyes away from the mirror and picked up what Nigel had left for him.

Two passports, red with golden letters, for one Jack Harper and Nigel Harper respectively, and two temporary residency cards under the same names. They were almost literally just printed, having arrived mere weeks before they were set to leave the country. Alex had counted each second until he could have them in his hands. They had already used them a couple times, just to practice.

It was remarkably easy to go back to the name Jack, Alex had found.

It had been a long journey from Alex Forbes to Jack Harper, but with each step he had become more convinced that *this* , this was the real him, the one that could keep them afloat and carry on.

Nigel had insisted on keeping his first name; he didn't like explaining himself much, and Alex was fine with just guessing. It was alright as well, easier to remember at the very least.

As for the last name, well, that part had taken some more thought.

He had been considering how to call himself–it was a decision that took time, and he had a feeling this would be the last time they would be taking on a new identity, if everything went their way.

And why wouldn't it? Destiny had been so kind to them so far.

So naturally it had to be a good name.

Maybe it was a final *“fuck you”* to his father, or a way to take Marian Harper with him everywhere he went. Truth be told, he wasn't entirely sure of his own reasons, but taking on his mother's last name had seemed the right thing to do.

Of course, Nigel had to go and make everything more complicated, as he usually did.

Alex raised the ID card with Nigel's information to take a closer look at it, and thought about the first time he saw that name, before their forged documents were even sent to be printed.

It was their agreement that Nigel took care of that sort of thing, so when he showed up with his laptop asking for confirmation, Alex was willing to just nod along to whatever he was told. In this he trusted Nigel's judgment.

But that time he’d had to do a double take.

There on the screen the names were clear. As they had agreed, beside Alex’s photo it stated *Jack Harper* as his legal name, but then next to Nigel's, there wasn't some made up last name that he had chosen and Alex had forgotten to ask him about. No, it said Harper, *Nigel Harper.*

To say he had been confused was an understatement. He had let a quiet *“what…”* escape before his eyes kept reading the rest of the document. More information on the page revealed that not only did they share a last name, but Nigel had filed them as *married* .

It made no sense, he didn't even think that was legal where they were going. What would be the point of doing such a thing?

Still, after the first reaction of incredulity and confusion, something else had bloomed deep in his chest. He didn't know what it was but it felt warm and safe and *violent* . Like suddenly he couldn't resist the urge to bite down on something and tear it to shreds like an angry puppy eating its owner's furniture.

Eventually, he had found his voice.

“Nigel,” he began and waited to have his full attention before proceeding to ask, “Is this your way of asking me to marry you?”

He had meant to say it as a joke, to sound teasing, and he had at least hoped that the smirk on his face looked convincing, because even to his own ears his voice carried the unmistakable melody of hope.

No such luck though, as Nigel had slowly looked to the screen and then towards Alex again. His seemingly all-knowing eyes had glinted and on his lips there was a smile as he had said, “I have already asked you, Jack, more than once. I have asked you to promise yourself to me for eternity and time and time again, you have said yes.”

It had been so over the top, so unnecessarily dramatic, and so typically Nigel that Alex couldn't have dreamed it if he'd wanted to.

He huffed, well aware that he *had* to be blushing, and tried to move on from the subject while Nigel simply looked at him with an infuriating smile.

Alex was well and truly doomed. What else was new.

So there they were, Jack and Nigel Harper.

Alex had been right, though. They could not be a married couple of two men in Germany, and this liberty Nigel had taken with their identities would probably cause them more trouble than they needed, but Alex had let it slide and at this point there was no going back.

“Alright,” he said, turning away from the dresser, arm extended towards Nigel with his passport and card in hand. “Grab yours, we're going to be late.”

“We are not, there is still plenty of time,” Nigel argued, but took the documents from him to put them away.

They prepared to leave after grabbing their belongings, which were now considerably more than what they'd had in 2006, when they were two teenagers running from a cursed city in northern England and all the demons in it.

Now they were entering their twenties and Alex had more things to his name than he had ever cared to dream about before. Even more than when he'd been the son of a well connected headmaster.

Nigel walked out of the room ahead of him and Alex followed.

As he moved to close the door behind him, he couldn't help but turn back to look inside. He took in the sight of the impersonal hotel room; they had left it as if they had never even been there at all. It was a generosity they rarely showed to any of the places they had ever been, as there was always a mark of Alex's and Nigel's presence wherever they went, a mark that had little to do with unmade beds or dirty

rugs.

Nigel always did like to clean up after themselves.

Alex thought about their apartment in Granada, handed over to their landlord in pristine condition, and he thought of their place in Skye, and the dorm they had shared in Leeds.

He also thought about human ashes in the air on a warm summer evening, the blood of a crow spilled on the floor, a terrible “accident” on a train and three dead bodies, two of which had yet to be discovered.

Before all this, Alex thought that living on the run would mean never having a home. He had been wrong, of course, just as he had been about so many things before. He was home, as long as Nigel followed, as long as he got to follow Nigel.

They belonged to each other and each other only.

It was only proper then that he had an emerald hanging from his neck, and a list on his phone of jewelers in Berlin that could turn it into a set of matching rings.

“Jack,” Nigel called from the hallway. Alex could hear the annoyance in his voice. “Are you coming now?”

With one final look inside, he took a deep breath and smiled.

“Yeah, I'm right with you.”

And with that, Jack let the door close, turned around, and never looked back.

♠ Fin ♠

Chapter End Notes

> If you've made it this far: Congratulations! You have successfully read through my first long fic and my longest story ever. If you've been here from the start, first of all, I respect the commitment, and secondly, I'm sorry because it's taken me way too long to finish this.
> I don't know if anyone reads these notes but that's not gonna stop

me from writing one.
This has been one hell of a journey. It has taken me almost two full years to finish writing this fic, at many points I truly thought I wouldn't make it here, I thought so many times of giving up, but there was always a chapter being written, as slow as the process might've been. Like Minds changed my life in ways I couldn't have expected and writing "He Stings Like He Means it", (or how we call it in the inner circle "HSHM") was a big part of that.
I've enjoyed it a great deal and hopefully you have as well while reading it. I want to give 50% of the credit to GrandMoffTisper for being a friend, a beta reader and the greatest driving force helping me get out of my head and managing to push through every step of the way.
This story was meant to be much longer, if you're interested in what else I had in mind for these two, what comes after Spain for them, you are more than welcome to reach out in any way and ask me. Unfortunately a good while back I decided that this would be where I would leave it. I love this story dearly but there are other projects that I would like to pursue and I didn't think it was possible to do both. Hopefully you will find this ending to be fitting and satisfactory.
Once again, thanks to everyone that left a comment, a kudo, everyone that bookmaked the fic and waited for the next chapter that took too long to appear. I have poured my heart and soul in this one and it feels incredibly rewarding whenever someone takes the time to show their appreciation.
For now I should probably shut up but first I'll plug in this playlist that I created for this fic. It has all the songs mentioned in the story, the ones I used as inspiration for writing or that I took something from the lyrics to use as a title.
Thanks to everyone, and see you next time!

End Notes

If you liked it: Comments and kudos are a blessing. Don't be shy.

Come yell at me on Tumblr

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!